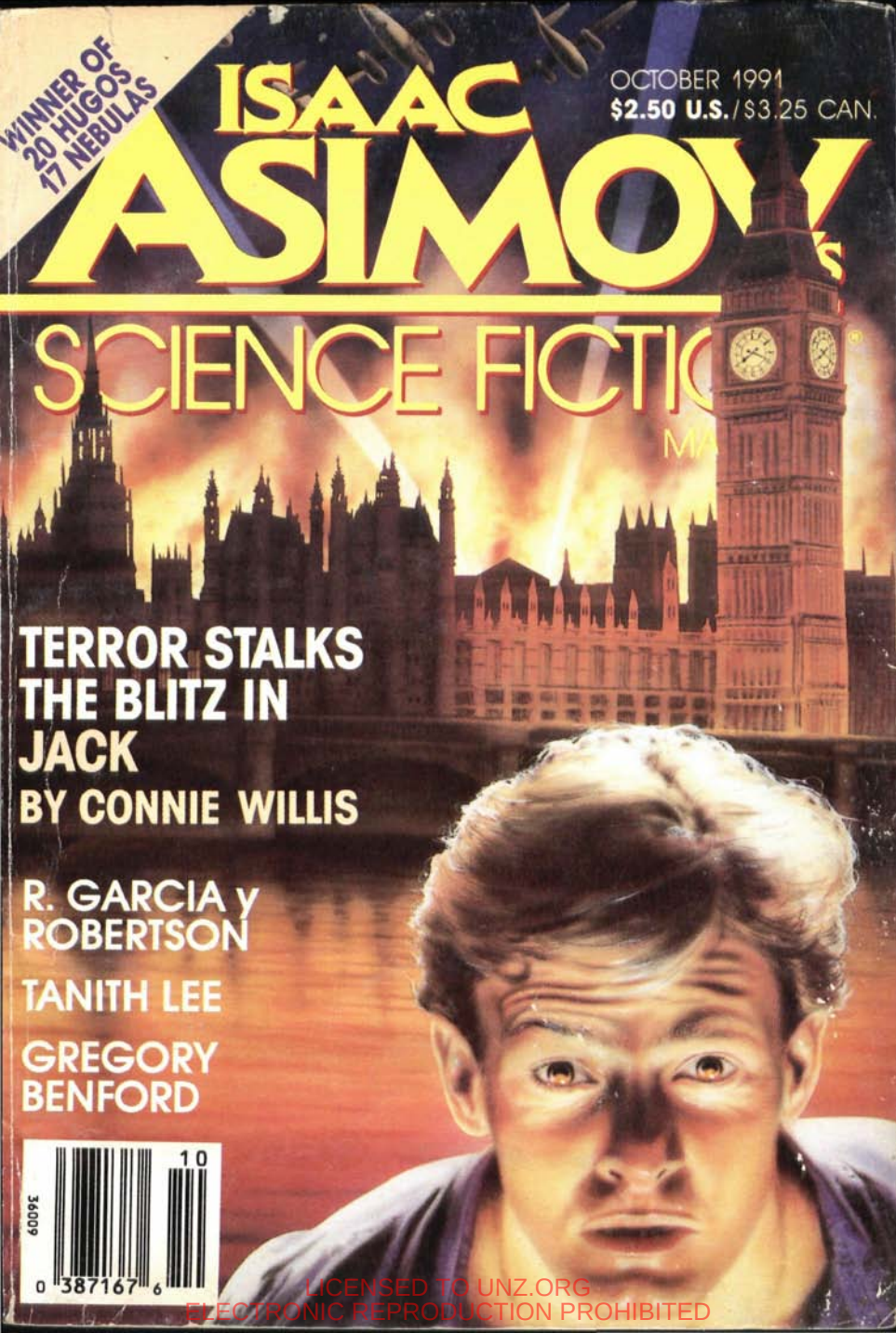

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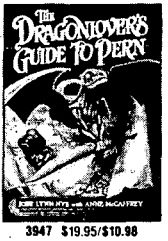

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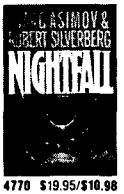

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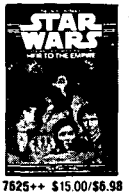

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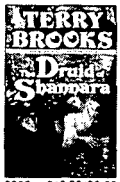

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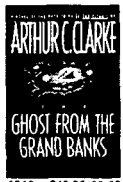

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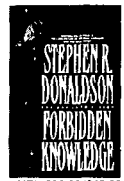

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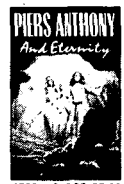

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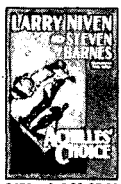

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

POSTCARDS

I never stop getting the occasional letter that sets me back on my heels with its stupidity. I have had a long life and I have grown cynical, but I have never truly plumbed the capacity of individuals for thinking with no more than the power, say, of a porcupine or a sea-slug. Let me give you an example by way of a digression—

There was a time when I was young and sprightly and vigorous and answered all my mail, every single letter, no matter how trivial. I was proud of the fact and even boasted of it, saying that anyone who cared enough about me to write to me deserved an answer.

However, time passed and little by little I grew older and somewhat decrepit and the piles of mail seemed to become more than I could handle—and still perform my writing labors.

Then, too, when I was young I had all the time in the world — years and years of it. Now, somehow, time seems to have contracted on me and its limits are more sourly apparent to me. So I don't have the time to answer all my mail.

What, then, do I do?

For one thing, I read my mail far less expansively than I used to. If a letter is trivial, if its sole purpose is to use me as an animated reference book, if it merely asks for an autograph or photograph, if it says nothing I feel any need to know or hear, I no longer answer. I have no time.

What's more, in the old days I used to send all my fan mail, even if unanswered, to Boston University, which collects my papers. Well, I've grown tired of baling up that sort of junk and if B. U. isn't tired, it should be. I just dump the letters and B. U. doesn't see them. (And if my lovable curator there, should find out, by reading this editorial, for instance, I will get a letter from him, a lot more in anger than in sorrow.)

What about the letters which, even in these latter days, I feel I ought to answer? Well, there are such things as postcards.

Postcards take less time. An ordinary note requires dating, addressing, writing, signing, and then it requires an envelope and more addressing and a stamp. A postcard takes one address and the stamp is already affixed. I figure

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it takes only half the time to send a postcard that it would to send a regular letter saying the same thing.

Of course, postcards have their disadvantages.

1) They are disrespectful. When you receive a formal letter from a good friend or from some established business, to answer with a postcard would seem flip.

However, flip or not, it saves time and that is what I am interested in. Naturally, if I feel a letter is absolutely warranted, I will write a letter, but I won't do so merely to avoid seeming flip.

For instance, the day doesn't pass on which I fail to get an invitation to come to Los Angeles (or Chattanooga or Battle Creek or Cheyenne or wherever) to do something or other. Well, I'm not going to write a formal letter every time, expressing my wild regret at not being able to oblige them. Not any more.

Off goes a postcard, reading, "Sorry, but I never travel." That's all that's needed, and if their feelings are hurt and they never again invite me to Los Angeles (or Chattanooga or Battle Creek or Cheyenne, or wherever) I can survive that.

Many times, I can't resist answering someone whose letter seems to call for a slap-down. So I do the slap-down on a postcard, and sometimes I am trapped into doing it vitriolically. My good friend, Martin Harry Greenberg, mourns over these postcards, because he

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says they are lost to the public forever. Apparently, he thinks that someday someone will edit a book to be entitled "Clever and Bitter Postcards Mailed off by Isaac Asimov to Jerks." Well, I don't want such a book. I've written enough (and in the opinion of some, far too much) as it is.

2) Another disadvantage to postcards is a lack of privacy. However, I have always had a rather vestigial sense of privacy myself and I don't worry very much about saying something that might make me look foolish. If my well-known intelligence can't survive a little folly, now and then, it just isn't worth my being Isaac Asimov. Naturally, I can't very well disturb the privacy of someone else, and when it is necessary to preserve other people's feelings, I write a formal letter.

That's the digression—

Now some reader wrote to me and for some reason I felt it necessary to answer so I sent him a postcard. He replied, thanking me for the answer but wondered at the fact that writing must be less lucrative than he had thought. After all, I had been unable to afford a twenty-five cent stamp and had sent him a fifteen-cent postcard. He offered to lend me money if I were really hard up.

My first impulse was to send another postcard, explaining politely that it wasn't money I was saving, but time—but it occurred to me that anyone so stupid as not to see that without an explanation wouldn't see it with one, either.

Here's another example. For some reason, people think that my name is a magical way of persuading people to send money out for good causes. For that reason, I have signed fund-raising letters for the American Humanist Association, for Americans for Religious Liberty, for the Civil Liberties Union, for Columbia University, for the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players, and so on, and so on.

It's always hard for me to say, "No" and in every case I have listed I have a feeling that I am working in a good cause. It's not inexpensive for me, either, for every time one of my fund-raising letters goes out, I have to send in money. I can't ask others to pay if I don't do so myself.

Now I know that people who don't like humanism, and religious liberty, and civil liberties will yell at me for this, but I care not two raps for them, and I am ready for their complaints. What I was not ready for was for one of the "good guys," a humanist, to complain about my asking for money for Americans for Religious Liberty, another set of "good guys." The complaint was that every dollar for them was a dollar not sent to the American Humanist Association. He scolded me unmercifully for this and ordered me to cease and desist at once.

I was flabbergasted at the thought that I couldn't ask people to send money to a variety of good

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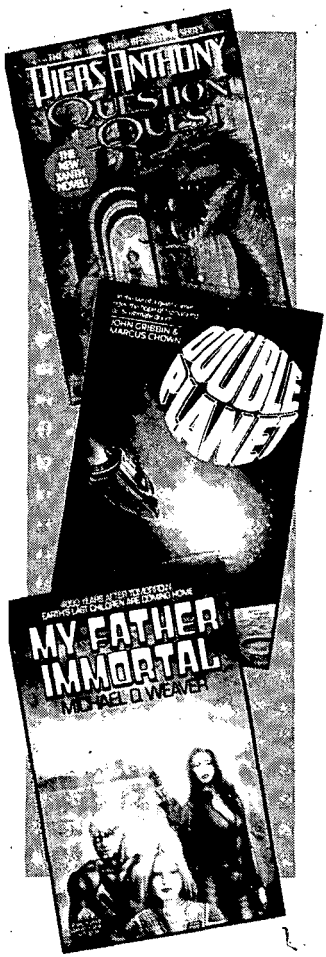

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causes. So I sharpened up a postcard and sent off a note reading: "Sir: You are invading my freedom of speech. I shall do precisely as I wish, and I ask you not to write to me again." (I hope he doesn't write. He disillusioned me badly.)

One more example of stupidity and I'll have enough for this editorial.

In an earlier editorial, "Grumbles of My Own" (September 1990), I had complained, among other things, about a critic who pointed out that my stories rarely dealt with Jewish themes. He seemed to me to be implying, strongly, that I was attempting to hide the fact that I was Jewish.

I found this insulting in the extreme. I make no secret of the fact that I am a non-observant Jew, that I never go to the Temple, that I don't adhere to the dietary laws, etc., etc.

On the other hand, I make no secret of the fact that I am Jewish by heritage, that I speak and understand Yiddish quite fluently, that I can handle a Jewish accent like a master and I can tell Jewish jokes as well as Myron Cohen ever could. What's more, I am every bit as stiff-necked as the Bible says Jews are, for nothing on Earth could ever persuade me to be converted to Christianity. It bothers me, then, to have some joker tell me that I am hiding that which I spread out for all the world to see.

And the example I used was that I kept my name, Isaac Asimov, and used it on all my writings, and that the name, in and of itself, is sufficient indication of my Jewishness. I pointed out that my critic, who was also Jewish, had a perfectly Nordic first name and a rather ambiguous last name so that if anyone was hiding Jewishness, it was he, not I.

I got a letter from him, an aggrieved letter. He couldn't get over the fact that I had "mocked his first name." He thought that was a terrible thing to do.

Now I want you all to understand the situation. The letter-writer is, by profession, a literary critic. He assumes the full right to mock the quality of my writing, the nature of my literary themes, my way of handling my Jewishness. And, having arrogated to himself this right, he is secure behind the unwritten law that a writer must never answer his critics.

Well, I am too old, too experienced, too well-established, to worry about any such rule. I intend to answer my critics freely, and if they don't like it, I don't give a Rhett Butler.

Yet because I answered, my critic friend wept all over his letter. How dare I mock him? Only he can mock. —And the brave fellow carefully did not include his address, so that I could not answer him directly. But this will do. I'm sure he'll read this. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Asimov.

I have noticed that every now and again in your letter column you claim to be the only one who likes your Azazel stories. This is untrue, as I greatly enjoy them. Now, I am not an avid fan of yours, or any author for that matter. I can probably count the number of stories of yours (aside from the Azazels) that I've read on the fingers of one hand. Okay, two hands (you have written a lot). The only issues of *IAsfm* that I am absolutely guaranteed to buy are the ones with Azazel stories in them. Good humor is hard to find in science fiction and fantasy, and I thank you for providing a recurring source of it.

Daniel Corcoran
442 Shipley Road
Linthicum, MD 21090

Thank you, my friend. I am not such a big shot, or so high in the estimation of the world, that I don't appreciate every kindly word someone offers my writing. Now, at least, there's two of us.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Yes, this is indeed another fan letter, although it is in somewhat of a guise. Please don't consider it *too* presumptuous. You see, I have finally found time to get through my *required* reading list (required for sanity and health—science fiction is an absolute must). The books I have finally finished include all of your later Foundation books—all of which I must say I have immensely enjoyed.

But I stray somewhat. You see, another book that I have finally had the good fortune to finish reading is Arthur C. Clarke's *Songs of Distant Earth*. You can see just how far behind I really was in my reading by the age of these works —that is precisely how long they have been sitting upon my shelf waiting for me to peruse them.

Anyway, I fancy myself as somewhat of a musician. I am impressed by the scene in Mr. Clarke's story where the *Magellan* departs from Thalassa. In this chapter Mr. Clarke details a fictional piece of music written by a fictional composer some ten centuries hence. This piece of music has so captivated my imagination that I would like to write it. However, I have respect for other people's work and feel that I must get permission from Mr. Clarke before I attempt such a venture—even though this is only for personal gain (my music is not good enough to publish—not yet anyway).

So you see, I am in somewhat of

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a dilemma. I have no idea of how I should go about contacting Mr. Clarke. I was hoping that perhaps you could either forward this letter to him or else tell me how I might myself contact him. I sincerely thank you and hope that you can help me.

William Erik Shepard
Athens, GA

Why, just write to Arthur's publisher and your letter to him will be forwarded. I cannot guarantee, however, that it will be answered.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear *IAsfm* and readers:

Will somebody out there please help me to understand? I'd like to ask a few questions, and perhaps stimulate some discussion among the readers of *IAsfm*.

Let me preface this by saying that I always read *IAsfm* from cover-to-cover because I'm willing to give an author the benefit of the doubt. What we're all here for is to have our sense of wonder tickled, and I don't drop a story after a page or two if it doesn't grab me right away. I don't realistically expect to like everything I will read, but since the author got published in these pages, I feel a responsibility to hear them out. After I'm finished with a story, I may regret that it wasn't my cup of tea after all, shrug my shoulders, and move on to the next one, but I don't begrudge the author for trying. The operative word here is "story." I do demand that the author (and editor) feel the responsibility to at least try to tell me a coherent story.

Over the past several years, we readers of *IAsfm* have been served up huge helpings of efforts in the style of *Vacuum Flowers,* "Elegy for Angels and Dogs", and now Michael Swanwick's *Stations of the Tide.* I bravely gave it another try—I just finished wading through the 140 pages of the latter, and I feel like the pigeon in the behavioral psychology lab that's trained to push a button to get his food pellets at random intervals. I just hammered the heck out of the button for the last three hours, and I think I heard the researcher chortle in the background—"Hey, Joe, isn't this hilarious? We left the dispenser empty again today and look at this poor little guy go! Ha. Ha."

Whatever we readers are supposed to like about this style of story (?) escapes me completely. Could somebody who does like it please help me to understand what virtues they find in it that I don't? I keep grasping for some element of basic storytelling that I can latch onto and keep coming up empty, unsatisfied, feeling cheated for all my effort.

Is it the prose? All I read is "Velcro prose." That is, a sentence structure and construction designed to stick the reader's brain to the page and keep it from rolling on smoothly through the text.

Is it the characters? Every character in the story has the appeal of last Tuesday's mackerel. Is it the plot? The plot seems to be constructed music video style—a series of unrelated episodes, perhaps assembled with the aid of a blender. Independently, we have a succession of short, sharp visual images, but after watching for

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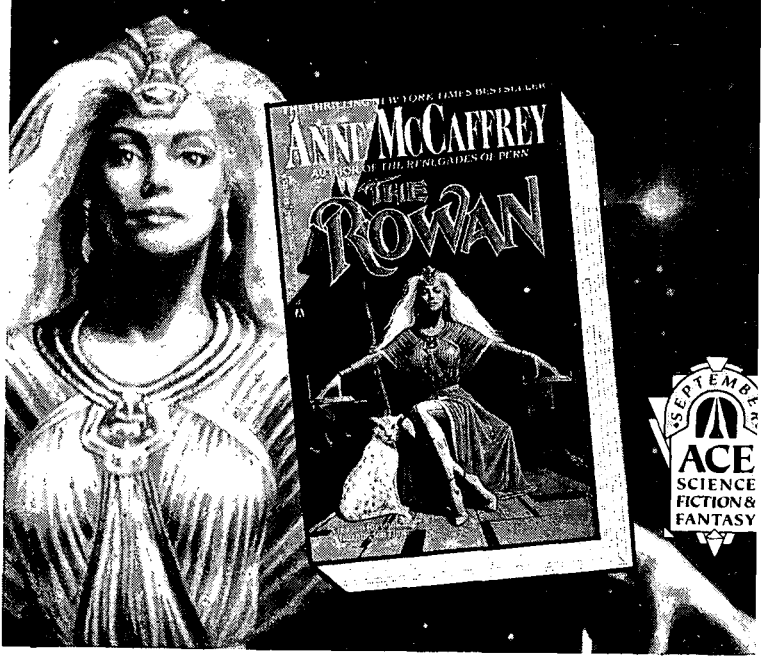

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three hours, we've seen a lot of light and heard a lot of noise, ultimately signifying nothing.

That's where I have trouble with the Swanwick effort and others of the same ilk. In homage to dear, departed Clara Peller, I am tempted to ask "Where's the beef?" Does anyone else out there share this reaction, or am I the only one who's missing the point?

IAsfm wants feedback on the likes and dislikes of its readership. Here's an unequivocal vote: give me more short stories—even daring experiments. Enough already of efforts such as *Stations of the Tide* or "Elegy for Angels and Dogs" as far as I'm concerned. We've been there before. They fail. Move on.

Comments from other readers? Have you seen enough too? Do we want some of this, but less than we had during this last year? (One-third of two consecutive issues on two occasions?) Does anybody want (sigh) even more of it?

Christopher J. Crowley
RFD Box 224
Lyme, NH 03768

Beauty, they say, is in the eye of the beholder. Personally, I intensely dislike modern poetry, modern art, and modern music (both classical and otherwise). I'm willing to admit the fault is mine, however. Modern science fiction (which I don't write, by the way) also has its detractors but there are many who like it, you know.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gardner:

I suppose it's annoying to an editor to only receive letters from readers who have complaints, so I feel a bit sheepish. But on the other hand, I show my appreciation for your good work at *IAsfm* by renewing my subscription from time to time, which is more like putting my money where my mouth is.

In any case, this complaint is one I have felt many times on reading different stories, and simply came to a head with Mark Tiedemann's "Targets" in the December *IAsfm*. I enjoyed the story overall, but the enjoyment was diminished by one annoying question: *why can't authors get foreign languages right?* We demand that the *science* in SF be correct, or at least plausible; why can't that be done for foreign languages?

Let me be specific: "Otro cliente por la puta creida?" (p. 56) is not Spanish, although every individual word is. It translates roughly as "another customer by the whore believed [by her; "creida" is feminine]?" which is just as meaningless in English. (Also, it should be "creída" and written Spanish questions have an opening question mark: "¿". If the character wanted to say something like "I believe the whore has another customer" it would come out "¡Creo que la puta tiene etro cliente!" On page 69, *Corales de Gas* should be *Corrales*, I'm sure; both words mean much the same in English, "coral" vs. "corral".

Allied to this, a few more. Red, white, and green, are the colors of the Basque flag—not Spanish (currently red and gold, the heraldic colors of Castille, Aragon, Leon, and even Navarre. The Spanish

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Republic sported red, gold and purple). I just can't imagine other Spaniards adopting Basque colors as their symbol—not in this relatively near future.) "Carlos Vallechi" doesn't ring Spanish — the surname sounds more Italian. "Manuel Adibba" doesn't sound Brazilian. The last name has an Arabic or African ring; marginally acceptable if one remembers that Brazil, like most of the Americas, is a nation of immigrants. They did have a president named Juscelino Kubitschek. But "Manuel" is Spanish, not Portuguese.

All in all, these are relatively minor complaints; but they did interfere with my enjoyment of the story. Is it too much to ask authors to pay as much attention to these details as they (supposedly) do to the science? The effect on this reader, at least, is about as bad as postulating a hollow Earth or a breathable atmosphere on the Moon. But it was not a bad yarn and the "universe" that Tiedemann presents may well be the setting for a few more stories . . . so let's get the details right.

(As a sideline, may I warn everyone against checking their Spanish in the local *barrio*. I find that much of the Spanish spoken in the US is, not at all surprisingly, heavily contaminated by English—particularly in vocabulary, but sometimes in constructions as well. The language is not spoken that way in the rest of the world.)

Otherwise, keep up the good work. Best regards to you and the Good Doctor and keep *IAsfm* coming.

Sincerely,

R. Julian Cattaneo

Ideally, a writer should indeed be meticulous about every phase of what he writes. However, we are talking about human beings who have to make a living. Past a certain point, checking and rechecking cuts down on writing time and, therefore, on income. My own solution to this problem is to avoid details.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Something that has been disturbing me very much has now become unbearable. It has long been my understanding that the purpose of your magazine has been, not only to disseminate good science fiction and the wider appreciation thereof, but also to raise the genre to a public acceptance above that of child's fare.

In a number of issues of your magazine (and others, including *Analog)* I have seen advertisements for the Science Fiction Book Club and various other book outlets that sell science fiction literature, and what do I see listed under some of the book titles? The following:

Warning: Sexual content may offend some readers.
or
Warning: Language and subject matter may offend some readers.

Since I don't see these warnings on other books listed in newspaper or magazine book reviews, I can only conclude that this type of alert is reserved for science fiction read-

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ing material *only*. However, I fail to see why science fiction literature requires the equivalent of the Surgeon General's warning that the ideas and concepts therein might tend to cause emotional distress, prematurely advanced puberty, or mind rot. For crying out loud, no one is going to eat or smoke the books, we just read them. And in these days and times, that should not be a dangerous exercise.

Of course, I must, in reality, come to another equally unappetizing conclusion. This ominous warning is really set in place for fear that some fertile, young mind might wander upon this or that tome of new thought provoking ideas and might actually initiate *independent thinking*. Good grief!!

What I find really difficult to understand is why you, Dr. Asimov or your excellent editor, Gardner Dozois, would allow this to take place in the pages (even if they are advertising pages) of your glorious magazine. More and more people are reading science fiction than ever before. The genre even appears on the pages of the New York *Times'* book review. We have gone beyond the time when once science fiction became a classic (such as *War of the Worlds* by H. G. Wells), it had the classification of science fiction crudely torn from it and was placed in the category of "speculative fiction" (in the 1950s, no high school library had Wells, Verne or any of the other greats listed under science fiction; there simply was no science fiction listing).

Dr. Asimov, don't you think that it is about time that you and the staff of your magazine addressed this very important point? I think that you will find that most of your readers are equally offended by this breach of editorial judgment, and in some intellectual respects, taste.

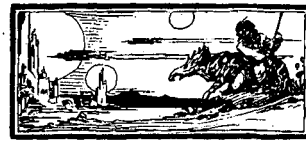
Allen J. Duffis
Technical Consultant
New Preston, CT

The warning we use is not unique. Motion pictures have rating systems to guide people. It's just that we grow a bit weary of letters from people who are shocked at the words and themes of some stories and we don't want to make them unnecessarily unhappy. So we warn them. Don't think that we don't know it can be counterproductive—that some people will read the stories the more eagerly because *of the warning.*

—Isaac Asimov

Some years ago we polled our readers to see how you felt about stories that contained scenes of sex and violence integral to their plots. Four-fifths of the readers we heard from strongly favored our continued publication of these stories. Our warning exists solely as a courtesy to the fifth of our audience who would prefer to skip or be prepared for the material that lies ahead.

—Sheila Williams



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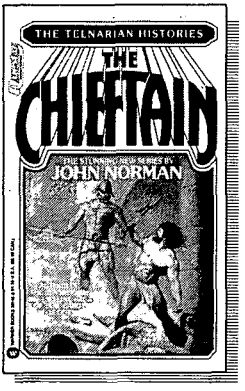


Cover art by Dorian Vallejo
0-446-36149-6/$4.50
(In Canada: $5.99)

A WORD FROM BRIAN THOMSEN

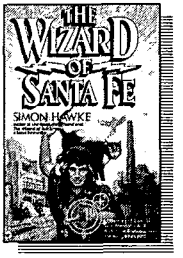
John Norman is known and revered as the creator of the bestselling Gor series, first published by Ballantine and then by DAW. It was a marvelous combination of Burroughsian space opera and social anthropology of a controversial nature.

I have always been a fan of the John Carter and Pellucidar series and consider Norman to be the best latter-day practitioner of this SF subgenre. His latest work starts a bold new series of the Telnarian histories, detailing the decline and fall of an intergalactic empire not unlike Earth's ancient Rome and is sure to garner him even more fans as he tells his tales of ancient history in the spaceways.

...and when you see me around, ask me about some more recent history and brave new talents.

ALSO THIS MONTH:

THE WIZARD OF SANTA FE



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BY THE TIME WE GOT TO GAUGAMELA

by R. Garcia y Robertson

art: Bob Walters

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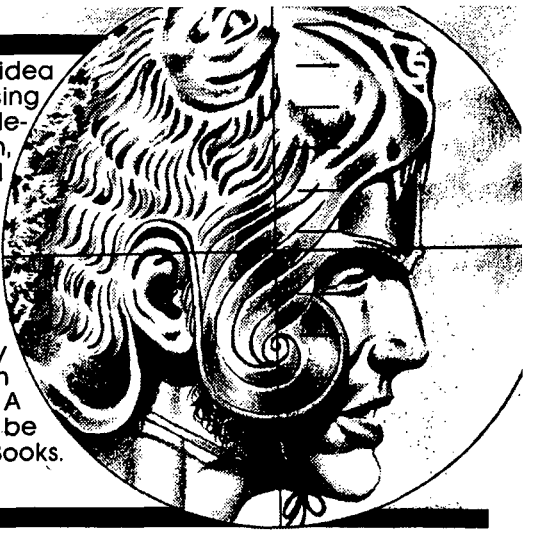


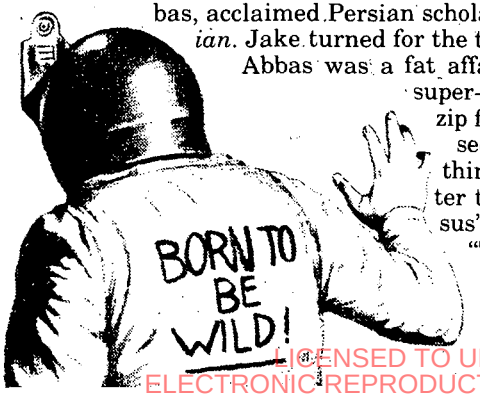
The author thought of the idea for this story while discussing ancient history with a Seattle-area science fiction fan, Richard Merins. "Richard said, 'Those huge Persian armies must have been like moving Woodstocks.' We sang the title in unison, and the rest is history." Mr. Robertson's first novel, *The Spiral Dance*, was recently published by William Morrow in hardcover. A paperback edition will be out soon from Avon Books.

Those who learn from history are still doomed to repeat it.
—Jake Bento

The Scythian turned the plastic bundle over in his arthritic fingers, never having seen a zip-lock bag before. A single straw-colored love lock fell onto his puzzled forehead. He had probably never seen plastic either. The man's outfit was all natural fibers: a riding jacket of soft leather dyed with berry juice, a tall felt cap with big ear flaps, cotton pajama trousers tied at the ankles, and a white ornate bow case made from human skin, the flayed right arms and hands of his enemies.

Madyas the Scythian was not a man to be called stupid—not to his proud tattooed face. He was just unfamiliar with self-sealing plastic.

Gingerly Jake showed him how to open the bag. The Scyth stuck his sharp nose and spade beard into the contents, sniffed, and smiled. A flood of Scythian burst forth, that Jake did not even attempt to follow. All he recognized were the nouns "Bessus" and *"bhang."* Jake had suffered through a crash course in ancient Persian, and picked up a smattering of Scythian—but next to him on the sheepskin was Dr. Mohammed Abbas, acclaimed Persian scholar and the author of *Spoken Scythian*. Jake turned for the translation.



Abbas was a fat affable Persian, wearing a polyester super-safari leisure suit, all pockets and zip flaps. Inscrutably charming, Abbas seemed to see the humor in everything. "Madyas says this smells better than the *bhang* they buy from Bessus' Indian Mercenaries."

"Tell Madyas it's Mendocino Green."

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The zip-lock bag and its contents had been scored during a hectic forty hours spent outfitting in twentieth century North America. The twentieth century, Old Style, was Jake's favorite spot for preparing expeditions because it was the last period in which practically anything could be purchased with paper money—a most convenient form of credit, ludicrously easy to faxcopy. Their packs and saddle bags were garish time lockers, stuffed with twentieth century loot—silk shirts and fashionable underwear, freeze-dried gourmet meals, French perfume, crude natural intoxicants, primitive portable tape players, and piles of cassettes with exotic names: Mothers of Invention, Otis Redding, Janis Joplin, Rolling Stones, the Supremes—not all of these were actually needed to negotiate the fourth century BC; but the twentieth century locals had handed them over cheerfully for bits of paper that were utterly useless anywhere else in space-time. The compulsion was to spend it all.

Given a decent portable copier, a fellow could retire in the twentieth century, were it not for the lack of amenities and the wildly overarmed natives. Life was too long to risk it in really dangerous time periods. The main difference between Madyas and latter-day mercenary-police-terrorists was that the Scythian was seriously underarmed. Jake liked that. He *preferred* periods where the worst you had to worry about were dysentery and hornbacked bows.

He also liked the way Madyas took his family with him on the job. Crowded around the sheepskin were cousins, kinfolk and henchmen, fairhaired *badmashes* of every variety. These Scyths were the original blonde barbarians; Homer's horse-riding, milk-drinking *Hippemolgoi*; Ayrans from the great Sea of Grass that flowed out of Asia—the *Yuechi,* the white-skinned redheaded demons of Chinese myth and history.

The outer ring was formed by wives and children, all agog to see how Madyas handled the strange Magi. Scythian women were charming in their wild way, strong and straight, with a sass-me-and-see look in their eyes, not locked up like their Greek and Persian sisters. They wore long iron knives on their hips, and suggesting harems or veils to them was a good way to get gelded. Behind the women and beautifully dirty children were the yurts, backed by black pines and bare peaks.

Jake licked a pair of EZ-wider papers and fixed them together, filling the long white tube with sticky green buds. Clearly, none of them had seen any of this before. Madyas's favorite daughter, Sauromata, stood wide-eyed at his shoulder; a pretty blonde miniature of her father, wearing a kidskin jacket and carrying two man-sized bows. The teenager's pajama pants were embroidered with pictures of Hercules mating with the Snake Goddess, a common (but disconcerting) design among these Scyths.

"And now for my Magi trick." Jake touched his lighter to the tube and it burst into flame.

Everyone exclaimed. Among people who treated fire like a god, the lighter never failed to excite comment. Jake took a long drag on the

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paper tube, then passed it to Madyas, saying "Abbas, tell them how it's done."

A semi-devout Moslem, Abbas did not smoke or drink, but he thoroughly enjoyed seeing infidels make fools of themselves. Patiently the professor explained the essentials of smoking. Madyas took a couple of cautious drags, then passed the smoke around the circle. By the time it reached the younger men, they were puffing merrily.

"Beats building a sweat lodge, doesn't it?" Jake had seen how the Scythians got high, filling a tiny skin hut with red-hot rocks, then tossing hemp buds on the stones and basking in the smoke—a time-consuming way to get a buzz, while risking being badly burned.

Madyas happily ordered a sheep sacrificed to show his appreciation. His golden-haired daughter in the goatskin jacket scooted off to throttle the animal with her bowstrings. Nothing but the best for the Magi from the future.

This meant more boiled mutton in goat butter. Jake stood up to steady his head. The highland air vibrated with clarity. He could see the stone ramparts of the Zagros mountains running in both directions above a breathtaking gorge on the Upper Zab. Eagles called to him. The river surged over the rocks.

"Stoned again." A tall redheaded woman was aiming a 3V recorder full in his face. After fifteen years of partnership, in and out of the sack, he and Peg were perfectly attuned—she could puncture his most romantic moods with a pair of words.

Jake deflated. The air no longer sang. He saw all the sordidness of the camp, a hundred or so armed men and women squatting among dirty black yurts, surrounded by feces—horse, human, and what have you. Cook smoke spiraled into the clear air, and everything smelled of sickness and sheepdip, overlaid with the odor of death. A savage combination of diarrhea and cholera had carried off several Scyths and a brace of Persians. Jake, Peg, and Dr. Abbas were inoculated against every disease known to this millennium, but they were fast losing the people they were supposed to be recording.

He waved for Peg to put down the 3V. "Don't waste the power packs."

She lowered the recorder. "Just documenting your instinctive reaction to a crisis." Peg was prettier than ever after her latest cosmetic surgery, but over the centuries the planes in her face had hardened, along with her humor.

It had not always been so. *Time Tours Unlimited* had started as the perfect match: Peg with the academic contacts necessary for funding; Jake knowing every nook and cranny in the past. Together they had been wizards at every phase of a project, from the original pitch to bringing the final product in under budget, brilliant beyond all expectations. They had honeymooned in the Upper Cretaceous, shooting a stunning Mesozoic documentary that put dinosaurs right in the audience's laps. Then it had been off to the historic periods, doing candid interviews with

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Cleopatra and Jenghiz Khan, followed by romps though pre-atomic Africa, India, and North America; and "A Day in the Life of Socrates" (ending in a drunken orgy cum symposium). Every project had the "Time Tours Touch," that ring of authenticity mixed with multi-media sex appeal.

But that was all history, so to speak. *Time Tours* had lurched through the last few projects in a perpetual state of crisis—leaving a trail of squabbles and petty mistakes that stretched from prehistoric Madagascar to medieval Greenland. Most directly, Peg had landed a low-budget contract from the University of Tehran to shoot some Persian history, and now here they were, stuck on the upper Zab with a hundred sickly Scyths.

They were headed south from the Eastern Anatolian Portal, posing as Persian merchants, and intending to join the Great King's encampment on the Khajir, a tributary of the Greater Zab. They had hooked up with these Scyths coming down from the Sea of Grass—then the cholera struck, landing *Time Tours* in a moral, ethical, and professional dilemma. Jake was too old a time hand to worry about "changing the past." One part of space-time was as immutable as any other. Whatever territory you were in was "the present"; you played your role, packed your tents, and went on. Showing off lighters and ziplocks was not going to send the Scyths rushing back to the steppes to invent plastic. The Scythians would eventually go home and tell funny stories about the southland, like Scyths had been doing since before the fall of Nineveh. No one would take Madyas's stories any more or less seriously than all the other tales of fire-making Magi and really good *bhang*. Jake's problems were more subtle.

The two Persians they had just buried were the Scythians' nominal commanders. Their deaths had made Madyas's people understandably reluctant to go any further into the fever-ridden plains of Mesopotamia. If the Scyths turned back, *Time Tours* lost its escort, and its easy entry into the Great King's camp. *But* if they did the natural thing—which was to cure the cholera and get on with the show—Tehran U. might call that interference, claiming that the recordings were hopelessly tainted, unrepresentative of the period. After all, cholera was organic and natural. Historically, disease killed far more soldiers than hornbacked bows.

Peg lowered her recorder, signaling a truce, motioning for Jake to come over and talk. Her features softened, making her more like the woman he had fallen madly in lust with. "When are we going to give them the cure?"

"Soon, soon," Jake shrugged. That was the human part of his dilemma. He was getting to *like* Madyas and his people. Natural or not, Jake would not stand around watching them struck down one by one, dying of vomiting and diarrhea. "But we have to work through Abbas, he's the historian, the only one who can square things with Tehran."

"I hope to Hell he gets on with it." Peg had already been dosing the children on the sly, giving out candied antibiotics behind Abbas' back. Jake approved. He didn't give a swig of warm yak urine for all this academic purity. He had been over the territory enough to know that

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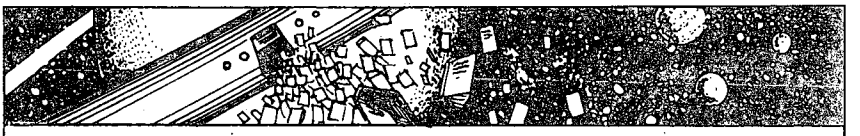
history was still history, even with Jake Bento standing flatfooted and bare-assed in the middle of it.

"Just remember," Jake warned her, "in the long run we may not be doing them any favors." This was the flip-side of Jake's personal dilemma. In ten days' time, there was going to be a king-hell battle down in the flats, and these Scyths were set to wade in on the losing side. Madyas's people might be better off having a brush with the cholera and going home now instead.

Dr. Abbas was dragging everything out for maximum effect. Madyas had a pair of soothsayers; one who worked with bundles of rods, and the other an *Enaree* transvestite who twisted tree bark. Abbas explained their antics with amusement to Jake. Both looked nervous. Sickness was serious business among the Scyths, who had an ingenious form of malpractice insurance. Magi convicted of fraud were tied to an ox cart full of kindling and set afire—the "lying prophets" were burned to death as they went galloping over the steppe behind terrified oxen. A wise doctor never promised too much. Abbas let his rivals work on into the evening, watching the moon come up. It was a big, full late-harvest moon. Coming up over the Zagros, it seemed to fill half the sky.

When the time was right, Mohammed Abbas took his cue from heaven, climbing up onto a stone outcropping and addressing the assembled Scyths, backlit by the moon shining down the great gorge of the Upper



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Zab. Leaping firelight cast double and triple shadows against the stone, as Abbas described the sickness infesting the camp, dwelling on its horrors, and then saying he alone had the cure. He did not seem bothered by the threat of becoming a road-show barbecue. The Scyths sat around, mildly suspicious, while Jake and Peg passed among them showing off the broad-spectrum antibiotic. Scyths are a skeptical lot. Under normal conditions, Jake was unsure how many would really take the medicine. Many had formed previous opinions of Persian Magi, and would take their chances with the cholera.

But Mohammed Abbas was leaving nothing to chance. As he spoke, he raised his hands overhead, and a red shadow began to engulf the moon. The Scythians were aghast. The shadow grew deeper and blacker, paring the huge full moon into a bloody thumbnail. Abbas pointed to the shrinking moon, saying that the disease eating at them had infected the heavens as well. His audience began to howl in terror. Abbas announced that only the antibiotic could save them and the moon—unless they took their pills, they would wander blindly forever, emptying their bowels in blackness. Scyths scrambled to get the antibiotic, dutifully swallowing their pills.

The antibiotic must have worked, because, by stages, the moon began to reappear. Madyas broke out the fermented mare's milk, and ordered more sheep strangled. (Scyths do not believe in animal blood sacrifice.) Everyone stuffed themselves on boiled mutton smothered in leeks and onions, while the Scyths drank themselves silly, as was their custom on holy occasions.

Jake glanced at the luminous readout on his wrist computer, noting the eclipse ended right on schedule. It was 30 September 331 BC. On October 1, Darius the Persian, King of Kings, and Alexander the Greek would meet for a rematch on the plain at Gaugamela by the river Khajir, preparing to do battle and decide the fate of ancient Asia—and it finally looked like *Time Tours* was going to take you there. Around him, Scyths sang and danced until the restored moon paled in the dawn light.

Riding south the next day, nursing his hangover on horseback, Jake should have been happy—but he wasn't. He was busy having hard feelings about the coming battle. (His horse was a modern hybrid—a thoroughbred Percheron mix, seventeen hands high, gene-spliced to be smart, docile, easy-to-ride, and faithful as the family hound.) In his saddle bag, the tape player rolled out a long Jimi Hendrix electric guitar lick, a mean booming version of some national anthem, complete with sky rockets and bombs bursting in the background. Scythians around him were thrilled by the music, thinking that they were headed for some brutal nomad holiday, being led into battle by bona-fide miracle-working Magi. Jake knew better.

He wondered why Abbas even picked this period of Persian history. The coming battle was a truly epic debacle that would topple the ruling Achaemenid dynasty and lead to nearly two centuries of Western domination. Persia would not fully recover for five hundred years, not until

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Ardashir established the Sassanid dynasty in 226 AD. Time travel was tremendously expensive—it was cheaper to take a round trip to Alpha C than to visit last Tuesday—so why record your people's greatest defeat? Abbas did not seem like some jovial masochist. Probably he was just an historian. His performance during the eclipse had been flamboyant, but effective, and their stock with the Scyths could not be higher.

The Greater Zab corkscrewed through the foothills, but when it hit the broad rolling plains, it ran straight for the Tigris. As the land flattened out, Jake rode stirrup to stirrup with Abbas, turning down the tape and commenting that Alexander must be less than a hundred miles ahead, hurrying to reach the Royal Road at Nineveh. Beside the boombox in Jake's saddle bag was a worn copy of Arrian's *The Campaigns of Alexander*. The Roman author claimed that when Alexander hit the Royal Road he would strike due east, making a personal reconnaissance with a portion of his cavalry.

Abbas chuckled, "So, the wolf is loose in the Assyrian fold."

"And a thousand miles from home," Jake added, "I imagine that makes him an invader as far as your people are concerned."

"Oh, my yes." Mohammed Abbas shook his head, adopting a confidential tone. "That boy is a great scoundrel." Alexander the Great, King of Macedon and Captain General of Greece, had just turned twenty-five, but Abbas always called him "The Boy-King," as if the military genius and mass murderer were an unruly adolescent. "Last year he sacked Tyre and Gaza, massacring the defenders and enslaving their families. Before that, he sacked Thebes. Next spring, he will do the same to Persepolis." Abbas sighed, "Persepolis must be beautiful. All Omar saw were the *ruins*, a thousand years later, and he was still inspired to write:

> *They say the Lion and the Lizard keep*
> *The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep:*
> *And Bahram, that great Hunter—the Wild Ass*
> *Stamps o'er his Head, but cannot break his Sleep.*

Think what it would have meant if we had saved Persepolis from the fire? If we had preserved the Throne of Jamshyd?"

"Omar would have had to find another rhyme for Wild Ass?"

Abbas looked startled for a moment, then laughed and called him a Philistine.

"Even a Philistine can wonder why we are recording the triumph of a world-class plunderer."

"Aren't you the man who posed as a Zen monk to interview Jenghiz Khan?"

"It was a talk over tea, not a mass slaughter: *Ah, take the Cash, and let the Credit go,/Nor heed the rumble of a distant drum!* That too is Khayyam."

Abbas shrugged, "We must study the great turning points, no matter if history is pivoting for good or ill. Besides, you cannot blame Alexander,

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he had a deplorable childhood. Leonidas, Lysimachus, and Aristotle trained him like an animal. Hephaestion, an older lad, molested him at an early age, and his mother Olympias murdered his father—who was a drunkard and an adulterer. Is it a wonder the boy turned out bad?"

The Scythians were ecstatic, seeing the flats unroll before them. This was not the wide hot anvil between the rivers of Babylon; here the land was more like hilly prairie, but the Scyths were fearless in any sort of open country, knowing no one but another nomad could touch them. The younger horsemen took their dogs and wandered over the plain, not likely to return until supper.

Madyas rode off with a goshawk on his wrist and his daughter at his side. He was a fine mix of the civilized and savage—his horse had an elaborate headstall, with gold cheekplates, but Madyas sat on a simple sheepskin saddle cloth. Sitting spear-straight on her own mount, Sauromata was proud to be with papa. Both had two bows in imitation of the Scythian Hercules; a regular hornbacked recurve bow, and a lighter wood one for rapid fire. Madyas had no sons, so his favorite girl was getting a boy's upbringing, which might give her complexes later, but Madyas did not seem to mind.

The rest of the children scampered along with the yurts, pelting the sheep and goats with pebbles to keep their walking larder moving, while women crooned a weird chant, glad to be leaving the mountains and cholera behind, certain that once upon the plains they would kick the ass of this crazy Greek boy who had challenged half of Asia.

Four days after the eclipse, they forded the Khajir north of the Great King's encampment, skirting the Jabal Ain-as-Satrah, and striking the Royal Road west of Gaugamela. The Royal Road of the Persians was one of the world's great living arteries, like the Appian Way at its height, the Grand Trunk in India, or the *Pe lu,* the Silk Road that runs all the way to China. The fall heat, the dust, the smell of dung and spices, were all familiar to Jake. He had walked the whole length of the Great King's Highway from Ecbatana to Egypt, in *zeria* and burnoose, to get the Cleopatra interview.

But here and now the Royal Road was near deserted. No *karwans* laden with papyrus, precious metals, and black figure vases came up from Egypt and Phoenicia—not with Tyre and Gaza newly depopulated. The Nile Valley and Ionia were now hostile territory. Nor was anyone fool enough to ship wares westward, where Alexander's army was eating up the landscape while the Persians wasted everything before him.

At the first well, they found the caravanserai near abandoned, aside from a few refugees in bullock carts, and a herd of dromedaries carrying frankincense and aromatic gum from Sheba at the mouth of the Red Sea. Arab drivers still got through, charging triple rates to ply the desert routes east of Damascus.

Caught between two armies, the caravanserai keeper was eager for business, but nervous at seeing so many nomads descend on his establishment. The man was an Elamite, a small, round southerner who

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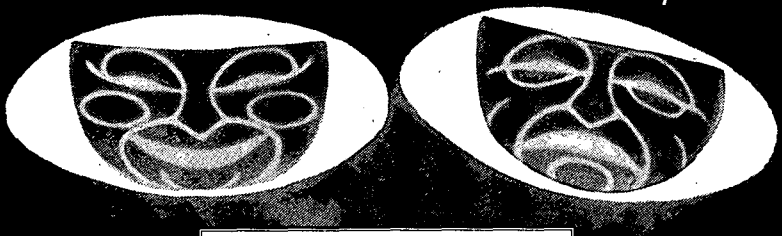

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wished aloud that he had stayed at home. Dr. Abbas did his best to soothe him, while Jake steered Peg into their private room, a windowless hole crisscrossed with bug trails and lizard tracks. It was wretched, but this looked like their final chance for any personal R and R before the war burst upon them.

During verbal foreplay, Jake made the mistake of sharing his doubts about Abbas and the coming battle. Just as he was bending her into position, Peg stiffened, saying he was criticizing her for swinging the Tehran deal. "Look, I don't like doing battles any more than you." She rolled over, staring moodily at the bug-stained wall. "After the mess we made of medieval Greenland, we can't exactly pick and choose."

Sex and the fate of Persia were soon forgotten. The discussion dwindled into a spat over who had screwed up worse in Madagascar. Clearly, neither of them was looking forward to Gaugamela. By the time they patched up their differences, Peg was not in the mood for sweaty coupling on straw mats spread over clay floor. "Restrain yourself until we get to a civilized period."

"We can do it on the sleeping bags." Jake started to roll them out. "Last week we almost made love in a Mendocino motel room—you're not going to call post-atomic California *civilized?*"

"This is the Black Hole of Calcutta by comparison—California had iced beer and air-conditioning, not carnivorous roaches and big ugly camel ticks." She squashed one with her thumbnail.

Jake took her hand, kissed the bloody nail, then tucked his half of the sleeping bag under his arm, deciding to bunk under the stars. There had been nights when a slam-bam argument was good for a bout of passionate making-up, but it seemed that those days were over.

Burning cow dung tinted the night air, turning it almost opaque. Illuminated by cook fires, the battered caravanserai looked like a Rembrandt masterpiece with a romantic motif, done on dusky canvas. Traffic had ceased, except for the ghostly gallop of post-riders coming and going. Jake saw refugee families sleeping under rags propped up with sticks, and searched for a sandy spot upwind of the camels where he could toss down his bag.

Hearing breathing behind him, he spun about. Madyas's daughter was standing a pace or two away. Sauromata had come up like a cat, and the dim firelight threw dramatic shadows across her face, accenting her high cheekbones, huge blue eyes, and wispy blonde hair. As much as Madyas might try to make his daughter into a son, she was clearly a young woman, with defiant hips and a wide sensuous mouth. She was still wearing the pajama pants showing an outrageously endowed Hercules coupling with a woman-headed Pythoness. Maybe it was the pants, or his mood, but the young Amazon in a loose blouse suddenly seemed like a terrible temptation; only her long sharp dagger reminded him that she was not a package to be trifled with.

"Great Magus, one of your bags has been misplaced."

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"Eh?" With a start Jake realized that the girl spoke flawless court Persian.

"Here, I will show you," she spun about, not waiting for a response. He followed, noting that beneath her fancy pants she was bowlegged from being brought up on horseback.

She led him to where their belongings were piled in neat stacks. Ever since the eclipse, the Scythian women had been doing their packing and unpacking, working effortlessly and never getting a parcel out of place. Now a single duffle bag lay apart from the others. The luggage they had picked up in post-atomic California was all new to him and Jake noted that this bag's ID tags were torn off.

He knelt beside Sauromata to examine the duffle. Beneath the grime and sweat of the trail, her body smelled of frankincense, cypress, and cedarwood; a heady mixture on a moonlit night under autumn stars. Jake had to remind himself that this job had enough sharp edges already, without throwing himself onto some wild sexual tangent with a teenage nomad.

"It has no marks," Sauromata indicated the bag, "and when some Bride of a Bull Camel tossed it down, the bag rattled. Perhaps something broke."

Jake reached for the zipper.

"We feared there would be a curse on it." The girl's words were very matter-of-fact, but Jake swore he heard a hint of cool challenge in her voice. Madyas's daughter was going to drive a lucky young Scyth totally daffy someday.

To show her how fearless Magi from the future were, Jake pulled swiftly back on the zipper and flung open the duffle bag. It belonged to Abbas. Jake recognized the man's silk shirts and silver-leafed volumes of Persian verse. From between the shirts came a glint of black metal.

He pushed the shirts aside to make sure nothing was broken. Next to a Universal translation of *Masnavi* by the Sufi Jala-ud-din-Rumi, lay a light lever-action rifle, broken down to fit in the duffle.

The raving of a hyena cut through the gloom, and the night-breeze raised the hairs on the nape of Jake's neck. "Well, dip me hip-deep in camel shit!"

The weapon was mid-twentieth century make, a period when almost any sort of killing machine could be purchased over the counter for trivial sums. He recognized a brand new five-shot, single-pull, Savage 99F, and several boxes of high-velocity .250-3,000s. The gun was a real *Killer Elite,* James Bond, three-kilo sniper special, with a 6x62 Weatherby scope. The safety was on. For that alone Jake was thankful.

He, Peg, and Abbas all had sub-lethal stunners for self-defense, but Jake guessed this gun had nothing to do with personal protection—not broken down in the bottom of a duffle bag. Nor was it Abbas's idea of a souvenir of the savage 1960s. No, Dr. Abbas must have brought the rifle and scope along with a particular target in mind, and he could think of only one person worthy of such preparation. According to Flavius Arrian,

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Alexander the Great was about to come dashing down the Persian turnpike, accompanied by two squadrons of Companion cavalry and his Paeonian Rangers.

But helpless Pieces of the Game He plays
Upon this Chequer-board of Nights and Days;
Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays.

—Omar Khayyam

Jake shouldered the duffle and stormed into the caravanserai to get satisfaction from Abbas. The professor was holding a symposium with a dozen drunk Scyths—rough and ugly customers—so the argument had to be conducted in friendly tones. Abbas himself was all smiles, saying he merely hoped to do some hunting. "Hares, antelope, bustards, that sort of thing—I planned to vary our diet by shooting for the pot."

The room reeked of wine, hasheesh, and *Kara Khan*—black opium—a vicious mix to spread among excitable nomads. Jake gritted his teeth, trying to avoid any hint of trouble in front of intoxicated Scyths. "Varying our diet? We've been eating everything from lentils and goat meat to goddamned freeze-dried gourmet meals. How many birds and hares do you think we're going to see marching with the Great King's hordes?"

"But we are not marching with Darius. I have convinced Madyas to head west, toward the Tigris." He nodded at the Scythian chief, sitting sloshed in the corner. "I mean to meet Alexander head on, and record the boy's first clash with Persian cavalry in Mesopotamia."

"Well, you won't need a Savage 99F to make recordings." Jake stooped down to retrieve the rifle.

Mohammed Abbas' reply was slow and even. "Do not touch that. The bag and its contents are mine." Their gazes met over the gun; for a moment, the jovial mask slipped. Intense pressure showed through. Temporal Shock Syndrome—the symptoms were all too familiar to Jake. Time Fatigue was an ill-defined disease, a form of megalomania where the victims lose their grip on the immensity of space-time, seeing only the "here and now," thinking that their actions could alter everything, even change the "present" that they came from.

Abbas grinned towards the Scythian thugs, who were happily guzzling wine laced with opiated *ganja*. "My esteemed colleagues will back me up—Madyas thinks the world of me; I can't imagine why." Drunk or sober, Scyths are no fools—they had clearly caught the feeling, if not the words, of the conversation. Jake saw that each Scyth had shifted subtly to keep his jacket clear of his knife handle. Giving Abbas a grim smile, Jake backed out, not wanting to continue the argument with a Scyth bowstring about his neck.

He should have smashed the gun on the courtyard outside—*before* confronting Abbas. Or so Peg told him afterward. She sat on a mat in their little windowless hole, shaking her pretty red head. "If you had

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destroyed the gun, or even pocketed the shells, there would be *no problem.*"

Jake thanked her for the timely advice, searching frantically through his saddle bag. "Honey, have you seen my stunner? The one with the taped power-pack."

"The Scyths have been doing the packing. I quit keeping track of your stuff."

"What about *yours?*"

She shrugged and pointed toward her saddlebag. He checked the bag. Her stunner was gone too. No surprise. "Well, here I am," he sat back. "What can we do *now?*"

"This is a clear violation of contract. *Time Tours* has say over all equipment." Peg did not seem the least worried. The woman could be absolutely nerveless when she needed to.

"I mentioned that clause to Abbas. The man was *not* impressed."

She tapped her wrist. "I have the contract filed in my computer—the phrasing is clear and explicit."

"Well, can we turn around and march back to Lake Van without breaking our deal with Tehran?" The nearest portal was a couple of hundred miles north by the shore of Lake Van. There was no portal directly into first millennium Mesopotamia. Tehran had cost-shared the opening of a portal with a group of Greek, Anatolian, and Transcaucasian universities—all getting government exploratory grants.

"Contract or no, we'll get a big black mark if we lose the head of a major history department in the fourth century BC." Trust Peg to calmly sit there, seeing the business side.

"We'll get even *bigger* black marks if we go taking potshots at Alexander and get run over by his Companion cavalry." Abbas might think that a single high-velocity rifle made him lord of life and death in this era, but Jake had no similar illusions. Without even the slim security of a stunner to back him up, his own impulse was to jackrabbit for the nearest portal.

"Any way you look at it, this job is over," Jake got up and started to pace. "STOP says we should get back to Lake Van and call in a team to collect Abbas." STOP stood for Standard Temporal Operating Procedure. Its basic tenet was, "Don't be a hero, *go back to start,* get the pros, who are trained and equipped to do the really dangerous stuff." Peg could hardly argue with that. But by the time they'd finished thrashing out their plans, the point was moot. They found four brawny Scyths with sharp curved blades seated outside the doorway. These guards were neither drunk nor subtle, and politely informed them that they were not allowed to emerge until the "Great Magus" gave his leave.

They sat back on the dingy mat, a little closer together this time because there was nothing left to hash over, nothing to argue about. They were just keeping each other company. Jake started to roll a smoke and Peg looked the other way. Finishing up, he ran a finger over the

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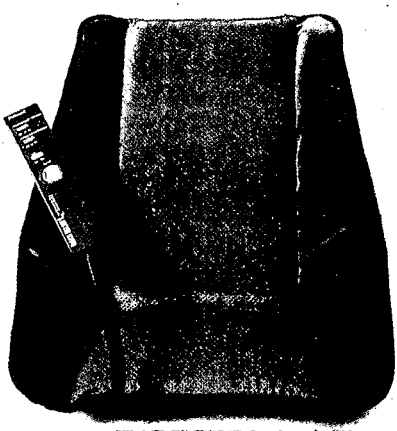

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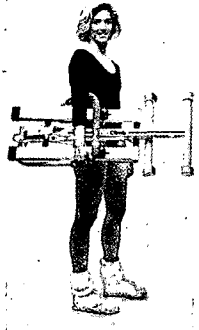

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warm familiar hollow at the nape of her neck, purring in her ear, *"We can still make love."*

"Lay off, Jake. We could be dead by morning."

"All the more reason." His finger traced the line of her jaw, but she hunched over further. "Being close to death does *not* make me anxious to fuck," she said.

"Well, what the hell *does?*"

"Don't take this personally, Jake, but our sex is stale, no longer new or interesting."

"Come on, how often have we had sex in a caravanserai on the Royal Road east of Nineveh while waiting to be throttled by Scythian bowmen? It can't be *that* many times."

She shrugged him off.

The Scyths let them out into the caravanserai court at false dawn, the hour the Persians call *subh-i-kazib,* when the sun's rays shine through a cleft in the world-circling mountains. Mohammed Abbas was sitting there, rifle and scope in his lap, wearing an impact helmet and a twentieth century flak jacket with BAD ASS BABY scrawled across its back. (In the twentieth century, another war was raging, turning out tons of surplus equipment. Jake's flak jacket had BORN TO BE WILD written on it.) Abbas wore Jake's stunner as well as his own. Jake recognized the taped power pack.

While they breakfasted on chicken and fruit stewed in mare's milk, Jake tried to explain to Abbas the complete folly of what he was attempting. "There is no *way* you are going to kill Alexander. We *know* he is going to defeat Darius at Gaugamela. All you can do is get run over in the process."

"Nonsense." Abbas started to assemble the rifle. "Every step we take changes the past. History has been altered innumerable times, so where's the harm in a little quail shoot?"

Jake heaved a sigh of sorry disbelief. Abbas was more an administrator than a working historian, and able to make a complete hash out of things he should know about. Written history *had* been glaringly wrong; time travel had thrown many cherished theories onto the trash heap. A lot of people had never forgiven science for showing that Moses was born an Egyptian, and Mohammed a Jew, or that Africans landed in the New World long before Leif the Lucky and Columbus. A vocal minority of philosophers and religious fanatics accused time travelers of *mucking up* the past, tramping about and *changing* things. (After the Jenghiz Khan interview, *Time Tours* had been sued for "defamation of an historical character" —actually, they had just let Jenghiz be Jenghiz, but the lovable old ogre was too much for some modern Mongols.) Abbas was apparently one of these unconvinced fanatics. Somewhere between Mendocino and Mesopotamia, his time sense had become woefully unhinged. Now he had bought a gun and meant to tidy up the past.

Jake stared at a black speck on the far western horizon, where the Royal Road ran arrow-straight toward the Tigris. He watched the moving

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dot get bigger, more sharply defined, becoming a horse and rider racing toward them. A faint flutter of hooves grew into a pounding gallop.

The Elamite came huffing out, leading a fresh horse. He turned the animal to face the eastern sun.

In a storm of dust and hoofbeats, the rider arrived. Jake recognized the felt cap and embroidered jacket of a Persian post-rider. Clutching his despatch bag, the messenger catapulted himself off his mount and onto the back of the waiting horse. In a blink, he was off again, splitting the dust, disappearing toward Gaugamela. A single shouted message hung in the air, "Alexander is east of Nineveh with a thousand horse."

Abbas finished off his fruit and chicken, slid the Weatherby scope onto the gun, and stuck the Savage in a saddle scabbard. "Time to ride."

"To ride, shoot, and *speak the truth*." Jake recited the three ancient Persian virtues.

Abbas laughed. "Two out of three is not ignoble."

There was nothing to do but mount up. The Scyths were loyal as dogs to the Magus who had saved the moon. Even Sauromata—who had seemed so respectful last night—just gave Jake a cold stare, as if she had expected more from him. She was wearing her jaunty lynx-skin cap, and the Scythian form of flak jacket, steel plates welded to chain mail. Her whole extended family was armed and ready to do mischief. Even the horses wore mail protecting breasts and foreheads. Bows, daggers, and double-bladed Saca battle-axes looked keen and vicious, but the high-velocity rifle stood out like a snake in the garden, a thousand times more dangerous to Jake than to Alexander. Numerous historians swore that Alexander the Great would go on to conquer Persia, Parthia, Bactria, and parts of India—not *one* sound authority said that Jake Bento would be alive by mid-afternoon.

He and Peg rode together. She too was wearing a flak jacket, and had her recorder clipped to her crash helmet, taking in everything, stubbornly faithful to their supposed assignment. With Abbas way off his rocker, Jake foresaw nothing but blame coming from this wrecked project.

During the noon halt, a troop of regular Persian light cavalry cantered by, riding in column, wearing scale armor above embroidered pants, and armed with javelins or short thrusting spears. Their officers wore eye-shadow and rode big Nisian geldings with gold cheek rosettes that caught the sun, giving the whole parade a festive air. Peg panned her recorder over them, using one hand to steady her helmet.

It irritated Jake that she kept right on working, refusing to admit that the job was as dead as Noah. Clipping on his own recorder, Jake peered through the view-finder, studying the flat treeless terrain ahead, seeing small flocks of ostriches and mixed herds of gazelle and wild asses. The asses ran ahead of the Persians, then stopped and looked back, having absolutely no fear that mounted men could catch them.

When they remounted, Jake tried a new tack with Abbas, riding beside him, humoring him, but pointing out that Alexander was not an easy mark. Several Persian cavalry commanders had waylaid Alexander at

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Granicus, piercing his breast-plate with a javelin, splitting his helmet with a battle-ax, and stabbing him in the head with a dagger. In Illyria, he had been hit in the head with a stone, and in the neck with a club. More recently, he had taken a sword wound at Issus, and been struck by a crossbow bolt at Gaza. Nearly every ancient weapon had gotten a whack at him, but his powers of recuperation were legendary.

Abbas merely began to prattle on about Persepolis, describing the lofty audience halls and porticoes with their fluted lotus columns, gilded capitals, and richly coffered ceilings—as if preserving this splendor somehow justified any stupidity. Jake grew disgusted and gave up. Abbas's history was all from books. To him, Persepolis was an abstraction, at best an ancient ruin; to Jake, it was a living place, existing in splendor or neglect for a couple of centuries. If Abbas loved Persepolis so much, why waste time with Alexander? Let Abbas go back a hundred years or so and goddamn *live* in Persepolis. He could get a job as a servant or courtier, and see the palaces every day, raising grandchildren in their shadow. But Abbas was not concerned with the *real* Persepolis; he was risking his life (and Jake's) to preserve an imaginary place—*the Persepolis that would have existed if Alexander had died before getting to Gaugamela.*

Jake panned his 3V view-finder over the flat horizon. Right where the Royal Road dwindled into nothingness, he saw dots bobbing up and down against the sky. Kicking up the magnification, he made out scattered riders, half-distorted in the heat, the horses beneath them hidden by shimmering air. The horsemen came closer, seeming to wade through the heat. He could see that they were the Persian lights that had passed them, recoiling, riding full out for the rear. Behind them, a dark line spread over the horizon, staining either side of the road.

He felt a sinking sensation, looked about, and discovered that the Scyths had halted. His horse had carried him out in front of the others. Madyas must have damned sharp eyes. Abbas was staring at him, nervously licking his lips. Peg was standing up in her stirrups, steadying her helmet with both hands, taking it all in.

The first frightened Persian flashed past. His finery was in tatters, his makeup smeared by dust and sweat. Behind him came a riderless mount, with blood staining the bullion-trimmed saddlecloth.

Jake refocused his viewer. The dark mass resolved into an arc of heavy cavalry spilling across the road, raising dust in the Persian's wake.

"Is it *him?*" Abbas fumbled with his own viewer. "Is it Alexander?"

"Who do you goddamn expect? Lady Godiva?" More Persian light troopers raced by. Jake felt thoroughly rattled. Only Peg seemed unconcerned, carefully shooting the oncoming Companion cavalry, as if they were a flock of pretty flamingos.

A Scyth lost control of his horse, and the animal tore off after the fleeing Persians, its rider pulling madly at the reins. This was how routs got started. As part of the British Empire series, Jake had recorded (from a safe distance) the breakup of Hicks Pasha's army at El Obeid. He recognized that moment when everything hung in the balance, when the

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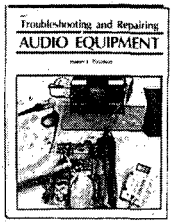

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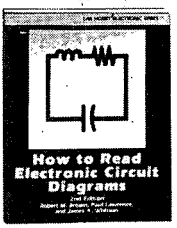

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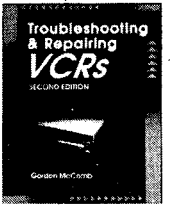

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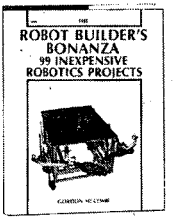

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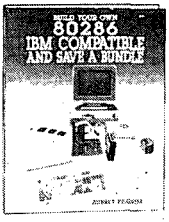

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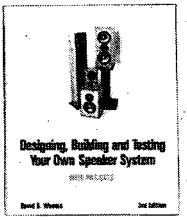

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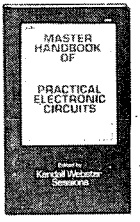

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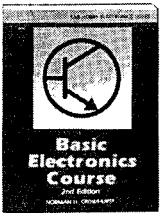

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riders needed to have their mounts most in hand. The Macedonians had momentum; they were crack cavalry charging full-tilt. There was no question of the Scyths holding their ground atop skittish horses—Alexander would blow through them like they were wet toilet tissue. The Scyths either had to counter-charge, or run clinging to the heels of the Persians.

At full magnification, he could see the Macedonians, sweat streaming down their faces, crouching behind their cornel-wood lances, points gleaming in the noontime sun—a sight to send a thoughtful fellow flying for safety. A real go-for-hell cavalryman (like Alexander or Simon de Montfort) would meet them head on, cantering forward, leveling his lance and sounding the charge (hoping to God his troopers would follow). But if anyone was going to commit that piece of folly, the hero had to be someone other than Jake Bento. He looked at Madyas. Madyas looked at Abbas. Mohammed Abbas looked uncertain.

The last of the Persians flicked past.

That was enough for the Scythians. To a man (and woman) they whipped about, sprinting after the Persians. The three Magi from the future were left sitting on their thoroughbreds in the middle of the Great King's Highway, while the line of Macedonian heavies thundered down on them.

Jake trotted his horse over to where Abbas was, waving toward the oncoming lances. "Your bird, sir—care to shoot?" Normally, he wouldn't waste a second gloating, but the need to put Abbas in his place was near irresistible. The insufferable fool must have supposed he could pot Alexander from the roadside, then canter off, considering it a day well done. Actually, the good doctor had a decent shot at Alexander (Jake had spotted the King's polished steel helm and ornate gorget flashing silver in the sun—Alexander was a commander who wanted to be noticed). But no five-shot Savage was going to stop hundreds of charging horses and men.

"What shall we do?" Sanity descended on Abbas. Jake recognized the familiar whimper of a *Time Tours* client appealing to his guides.

"We run." Jake jerked his horse's head around. "Follow the Scyths."

If you mean to flee, there are no better examples to imitate than the Scyths. Honest soldiers admit that they can run if need be, but Scythians glory in flight. They once led the Persian Great King in a merry chase from the Danube to the Don, almost to the Caspian Sea, then back to the Dardanelles, without coming close to being caught. When they got back to the Bosphorus, the Scyths were so far ahead of the Persians that they couldn't figure out what had happened to their pursuers, and doubled back trying to find them.

Jake urged his hybrid mount into overdrive, laying his head down along the horse's neck, hearing hooves beat on the hardpacked clay. The Royal Road was as flat as a track, and he doubted Macedonian heavy cavalry would get within twenty furlongs of them. Nor were Alexander's men armed with bows. His only worry was that his horse would founder

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and go down, but even then Jake felt safe from the Macedonians, because at this speed he would surely break his neck.

Abbas was somewhere behind him, but Peg's horse had a lighter load and surged ahead. She was riding like a Parthian, turning about in her saddle to record the chase. Jake admired her determination, even as he cursed her for taking such chances.

Suddenly the Scyths broke right, leaving the road to race off over the stony hardpan, scattering a flock of ostriches. They were trying to confuse the pursuit, giving the Macedonians two targets to follow—up ahead the Persian light horse was keeping to the road. Peg turned to follow the Scyths, and so did Jake. Glancing back, he saw Mohammed Abbas holding grimly to his horse. They were all three riding gene-spliced hybrids, with modern saddles and harnesses, but still had no chance of catching the hardriding Scythians. (Scyths went straight from mother's milk to mare's milk—Jake had *seen* Scyth children nursing on brood mares.)

As the road dropped behind him, Jake saw the Macedonian heavies continuing on after the Persians. He heaved a sigh of gratitude and reined in, glad the race was over.

Doc Abbas pulled up even, face ashen, sweaty as Satan's armpit, petrified at almost being run down. (Bravo, thought Jake, should shock some sense into him.) The harsh brush with reality had thrown Abbas from mania into depression. (In this condition, Time Shock victims turned docile, too disoriented to resist forceful suggestion.) Jake started by demanding his stunner. Abbas meekly handed it over, followed by Peg's. Jake planned to get the Savage next.

He leaned over and pushed Peg's stunner into the holster on her hip. She asked, "Who's this coming up?" Her face was fixed to the view-finder, still recording events behind them.

Turning in the saddle, Jake saw a smaller party split from the right flank of the Macedonians. Focusing his own view-finder, he recognized riders coming on, wearing leather jackets and carrying javelins.

"Paeonians!" he shouted. "Get the hell out of here!"

Abbas slashed at his mount, and Peg took off. Jake followed behind them. The chase was on again, only this time the Scyths were far ahead, somewhere out of sight. It was just the three of them, dogged by half a hundred Paeonian Rangers. Ground flashed beneath him, first a dry *wadi* filled with sage and tamarisk, then gray shingle and packed gravel, followed by pasture and fields burnt by the retreating Persians.

The Paeonians were irregular cavalry, Alexander's barbarian mercenaries, poorly armed and indifferently mounted, not particularly impressive . . . *unless they happened to be after you.* The sun blazed down and the Paeonians gained. Jake knew it was no longer a race but a hunt, and stamina counted for more than speed. The little men on wiry mounts were hanging back, using hunting tactics, waiting for the big thoroughbreds to tire. A race horse that can fly around a short enclosed track can be run down on open ground by a man on foot, if the man is patient and persistent.

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They tore over the flat landscape, passing occasional knolls and ancient villages sitting atop their *tells,* the accumulated debris from centuries of occupation. Far ahead Jake could see thorn trees and woody acacias, backed by a distant line of palms that meant another *wadi.*

The Paeonians edged closer, coming up gradually, gaining meter by meter. He no longer needed his view-finder to see their grinning, wind-burnt faces, or the tips of their keen-edged javelins. Abbas was several horse lengths behind him, clawing at his saddle scabbard, trying to get the Savage out.

"Khabardar," Jake called out a warning in Persian. "Use your stunner." The over-educated idiot didn't realize a high-velocity rifle with a telescopic sight was useless at a full gallop. Amid the thud of hooves and the whoops of the Paeonians, Abbas had no chance of hearing. Jake drew his own stunner, waving it over his head for the silly fool to see. Peg was wielding nothing more dangerous than her recorder.

Demonstrating the proper defense, Jake pointed his stunner at the nearest rider, depressing the stud and sweeping the beam over the horseman. Horse and rider crumpled, going limp and landing in a heap. They were gone from sight before Jake could tell how the man had taken the fall.

More Paeonians closed in to replace the one that went down. Jake dispatched a second horse and rider, but he doubted the others even knew what was happening—the stunner had no flash. Its shivering hum was lost in the chaos around them.

Crashing into the acacias, Jake had to concentrate on riding and try to keep from hitting a tree. He could no longer cover them all. The jubilant barbarians surged closer, letting fly a barrage of their own—long black darts arched up and came down. Jake had never imagined such a nightmare ride, weaving in between thorn trees while dodging razor sharp darts. The speed alone was terrifying. Acacias flashed past. Javelins dropped without warning. A sharp point glanced off his flak jacket, skidding sideways, slashing his horse on the rump. The poor beast squealed in pain, lurching to the side, threatening to throw him.

As he regained his seat he saw Abbas go down. The doctor's horse was trailing several javelins, but Jake could not see if Abbas himself was hit.

Two Paeonians were abreast of Peg, trying to seize her reins. Until now she had been nonchalantly recording the whole show. Clinging to her reins and recorder, she tried to draw her stunner with her free hand. One of the leather covered riders grabbed her rein arm, jerking her horse's head back. Jake lost sight of her as his wounded mount careened forward.

Three murderously persistent Paeonians were half a length behind him, jostling each other, jockeying for position. Trying hard to hang on, Jake could not twist about to fire. Nose to tail, they passed the last acacia, his horse bounding like a thing gone mad.

The line of palms stretched ahead, marking the dry watercourse, but Jake knew he would never reach that slim cover. The swiftest barbarians

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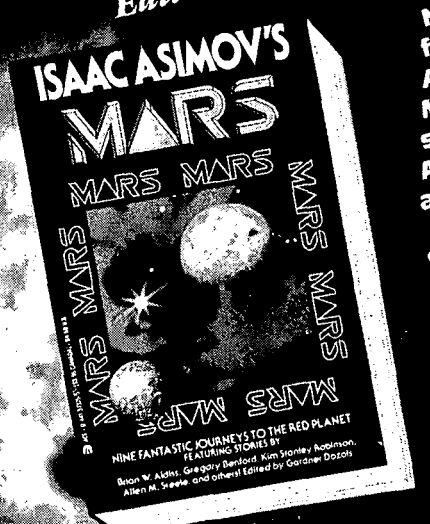
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were pressing in, crowing with delight, waving their weapons and raising clouds of stinging dust. Clods thrown up by the horses hit him in the arms and hips. The next flight of javelins was bound to bring him down. The Paeonians seemed bent on taking prisoners, but Jake had forgotten how to say "I give up," in Greek. (He had never studied Paeonian.) Instead, he screamed all the other phrases drilled into him for such situations. *"Bassak.* Enough. *Nicht schiessen. No tira amigo.* Journalist, *Bao Chi*—French journalist, *Bao Chi Fap."*

Riders burst from the line of palms fifty meters ahead of him, firing arrows and yelling like fiends on horseback, slamming right into the startled Paeonian Rangers.

He recognized the brightly colored Scyths. This was their favorite tactic: first the feigned (or real) retreat, followed by a furious counter-attack. Madyas had collected his people in the *wadi*, waiting in ambush for just the right moment. Now they stormed out, possessing every advantage—numbers, surprise, bows, and armor. The Paeonians were strung out and half-disarmed, having thrown most of their javelins. Jake saw Sauromata coming on like a blonde Comanche, lynx cap gone, arrows in her fist, working her light wooden bow as fast as she could draw and fire.

Cane arrows zipped past him into the knot of Paeonians at his heels. The men's leather jackets stopped the shafts, but the trio did not wait for Sauromata to find a soft spot. The three riders broke in three different directions.

With no one left to run from, Jake reined in, pulling his hurt and frightened horse to a stop. His chest heaved in and out. He was shaken, dazzled by the noontime sun. The echo of hoofbeats faded. He could hear bees buzzing—a row of white clay hives sat in the green shadow of the palms, and the dusty air smelled heavily of dates.

Sauromata came trotting up, enormously pleased with herself, her light bow tucked under her arm, golden hair blown across her face. Aside from the bees, and the birds singing in the date palms, they were completely alone. The other Scyths had all disappeared into the acacias, chasing the scattering Paeonians.

He greeted her in Persian, pointing toward the thorn trees, saying he had to look for the rest of his people. She grinned agreeably, falling in behind him as he dismounted and walked his horse towards the little wood. Beneath the acacias, he could see a dark lump lying on the churned ground, bristling with javelin shafts. It was Abbas' horse. Mohammed Abbas was a few meters away from his thoroughbred, lying with one leg at a horrid angle—it must have broken when he fell. That was not the worse of it. While the professor lay writhing in the dirt, a Paeonian had leaped down and slit Abbas's throat.

Jake took Abbas's stunner, and the gun meant for Alexander the Great—so much for amending history. He loosened his own flak jacket. Hot air under the trees smelled of blood and horseshit, and the purple gash under the doctor's chin crawled with flies. All Jake could think of

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was a quatrain from Khayyam that Mohammed Abbas would have done better to remember:

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: not all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

There was still Peg. Walking back toward the palms, Jake saw a gleaming object lying on the ground. Peg's stunner.

Poor Peg. He shook his head. Struggling with her horse and that pair of Paeonians, she had dropped the one thing that might have saved her. He picked up the stunner and went on. (Jake was strict about not littering the past with out-of-period weapons. Work was unpredictable enough already.)

Sitting down under the palms, he could hear the bees buzzing again. Sauromata dismounted and stood over him. Space and time took a deep breath. During the flying rush, his senses had been insanely sharp—showing him fear and exaltation on people's faces, flying spittle, and tiny pebbles in the dirt. Now his focus had snapped. Light seemed too harsh, shadows impossibly soft. Poor, poor Peg. She had to be all right. He would find her. He had not seen her body, or her horse, so the Paeonians probably had her. She was the sort of prisoner they would hang onto. They would not do to her what they had done to Abbas.

Close to sobbing, he shook some papers out of his pocket, opened his *bhang* pouch and tried to roll. He found that his hands were shaking violently, and he spilled half the pouch before the little trough of paper had anything in it. Then he tried to lick the paper, slobbering all over it, making it impossible to light.

Gently, Sauromata took the pouch and papers away from him. She sat herself down across from him, legs crossed, and began to roll a second cigarette in her lap. Stupefied, Jake studied her. The girl deftly stuck two papers together, filled them with *ganja,* sealing the tube with her tongue. He realized that she had only seen him do this once, on the day of the eclipse in their camp above the Greater Zab, but she copied each movement perfectly. This girl was sharp as a spear point, aside from being intensely beautiful.

Proudly, she held up the completed cigarette. He fished into his pocket and found his lighter, handing it over to her. She turned it around in her fingers, then flicked it on, lighting the paper just the way he had. At least *one* Scyth teenager was clearly not awed by Magi's tricks.

They passed the *ganja* back and forth, Jake taking deep drags, trying to steady himself. Damn, was Peg right? Did he respond to *every* crisis by getting stoned? Halfway through, Sauromata shed her mail coat, then slid up to him, moving on her butt without uncrossing her legs. She looped her arms around his neck and began to nuzzle him, whinnying

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softly, like a foal. His own flak jacket hung open, and he felt her supple body press against him, strong, yet flexible.

Given his shaken and stoned condition, Jake did not need much convincing. Nothing in space and time seemed as desirable as her. As he introduced her to tongue kissing, she leaned forward and slipped down her embroidered pants. He reached around, cupping her bottom, pulling her closer. Besides the spices Scyth women rubbed on themselves, her body had a young animal odor—smelling of dirt, sweat, and horses.

She opened her jacket, kicking free of her pants, and started to unfasten his. She was still unfamiliar with zippers, but he let her work at it and lay back, listening to the bees, feeling the swell of sensation, running his hands over her nipples, navel, inner thighs, the back of her knees. She squealed in triumph when she got everything undone.

At the proper moment, he introduced her to the ribbed and lubricated condoms he had gotten in the men's room of a Sonoma, California filling station. Her blue eyes sparkled, and she laughed in his ear, whispering, "My Magus makes love like an Egyptian."

These are facts, historical facts, not schoolbook history, not Mr. Well's history, but history nevertheless."

—Casper Gutman to Sam Spade
The Maltese Falcon

Lying in the shade of rustling palm leaves, it did not take Jake long to have second and third thoughts. He had plenty to feel guilty about. Sauromata was sprawled on her belly within easy reach, happily humming to herself, wearing only her leather jacket and linen blouse; white buttocks showing above grimy thighs. Good old Doc Abbas was dead. Peg was a prisoner. Their project was a debacle—at best, another big zero for *Time Tours*; at worst, a string of law suits. Tehran U. would be too livid to talk to. And his first impulse had been to grab a short vacation in the shadiest spot around; getting stoned, then laid, then lounging under the palms—putting all the *big* problems on hold.

Well, damnit, what *could* he do? His horse was wounded and frantic. He couldn't just jog off after Peg, planning to take on Alexander's entire army (40,000 infantry and 7,000 horses, according to Arrian). Mohammed Abbas had tried *that*—with spectacularly poor results.

Even as he admired the curve of Sauromata's thigh, he could not help thinking about Peg turning back in her saddle, coolly recording the oncoming riders—reminding him of their honeymoon in the Cretaceous, when she had gotten unbelievable shots of a pack of charging Tyrannosaurs by throwing herself prone in their path. The woman was completely fearless when it came to *getting the job done*. He realized just how much he relied on her to keep things rolling.

There was only one thing he *should* be thinking of. STOP. Hot-foot it for the shores of Lake Van. Get to the portal and call in a reaction team that would hit the ground running; spot Peg with remotes, and make

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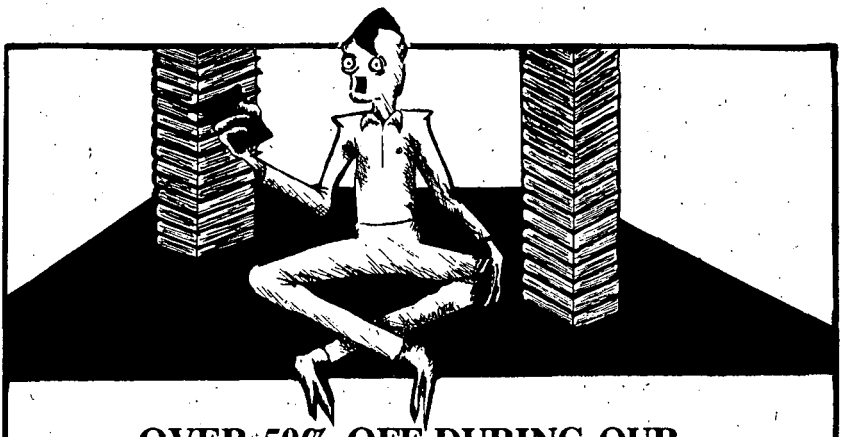

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the pickup at the first available instant—no fuss, no muss. They would probably go back and grab her while the Paeonians were still fleeing from the Scyths. Opposition would be nil. Saturate the target with anesthetic-amnesiac fog and yank her out in a flitter. The whole thing would never be noticed amid the general hysteria created by the Scythian attack.

The operation *would already be over by now.* It would be done before he and Sauromata ever sat down to smoke. That was the weird doppelganger beauty of time travel. You *could* be "in two places at once." He could hike to Lake Van and be back here with a reaction team *before he had even left.* At the same moment he was thrashing in the sand with Sauromata, introducing her to lubricated condoms, he could also be in a flitter with Peg, flying back to the portal, convincing her to take some physical comfort. Done *right*, time travel not only erased your mistakes, but doubled your pleasure. Jake did love his job.

All these wonderful things did not happen automatically, though; Jake actually had to *make* the hike to Lake Van, and call in the team . . . *but* he could put off that onerous trek more or less indefinitely. It did not matter *when* he returned to the future to pick up Peg in the past. In another sense, he had already done it, and could start to collect his reward right away.

Sauromata began to snuffle the way a mare does when she wants attention. He rummaged through the tapes; the ones marked Jimi Hendrix and Rolling Stones were too raucous for what he had in mind. He popped the one marked Otis Redding into the recorder, searching through it until he found "On the Dock of the Bay."

Then he got out a bottle of *Jasmine Scented Kama Sutra Oil,* slipped behind Sauromata and began to massage her buttocks in time to the music. When they found some fresh water he would have to introduce this Scyth to thorough bathing. Sauromata squirmed a bit, murmuring dreamy appreciation.

Without looking up she reached into the equipment lying about them. Her hand closed on the stock of the Savage and she pulled it from its scabbard. "What is this?" Her Persian sounded sweet and drowsy.

"It's a rifle," he replied, still rubbing her rump—trust a teenage Amazon to be piqued by that piece of equipment. "It's like a stone bow, only much more powerful." He had seen pebble-firing crossbows used for bird hunting—but maybe that was in medieval Europe.

"Last night I did not know what was in the bag. I only wanted to know your power. The Persian Magus said there was a curse on that bag, and no one but him could open it safely. I was sure you would not fear his curse." She propped herself up on her elbows, reaching into her sleeve. "So I took these off." Her hand reappeared, holding the ID tags torn from Abbas' duffle bag.

Jake stopped rubbing, resting his hands on her bare thighs, staring at the torn ID tags.

Sauromata cocked her head, smiling up at him. "Keep rubbing. My

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father said the Persian who restored the Moon was the greater Magus, and we must side with him, but now you are alive and the Persian is dead. Father cannot argue with *that*."

There was more to this girl than he had suspected. She sighed, rolling her thighs beneath him. "Keep rubbing."

A little shaken, he began to knead her rear again, realizing Sauromata had a vise-tight view of the world, and was not afraid to act on it. A somewhat unsettling thought. She had manipulated him nicely, at the same time exposing Abbas. How would she react when he told her he had to take off and rescue Peg in the past? It would probably not do to mention it to her, not right off. Instead, he leaned down and kissed the gold tangle at the nape of her neck. Her body smelled of sex and spices. Jake realized just how hard it was to get back to work once you had found better.

Abruptly, Sauromata rolled over, pulling on her pants and declaring they could dally no longer, saying that they must find Madyas and the rest of the Scyths. Jake buttoned his fly and flak jacket, wondering if all headstrong young women treated sex as a diversion, always there for the asking. They set off, Sauromata riding, and Jake walking his hurt and traumatized mount.

On the far side of the acacias, they found a Paeonian lying face down in a muddy irrigation ditch with a cane arrow in the back of his neck. The luckless savage had crawled to the ditch to find water for his torn throat, then drowned in the mud or bled to death. In her sure matter-of-fact way, Sauromata swung off her saddle cloth, drew her dagger and cut a deft circle around the man's head, above the ears and below the hairline. Planting a slippered foot in the Paeonian's back, she pulled until the flap of skin and scalp came off in her hand. Jake had seen Blackfeet scouting for the RCMP do the same thing in nineteenth century Canada—and not nearly as neatly. Sauromata had all the innocent cruelty of a young tigress, like a grown child who does not know what it is to die. When he had loosened her jacket and pulled her to him, he had gotten a lot more than the instant comfort he had been grabbing for.

Madyas and his kinsmen came straggling back over the plain in ones and twos. Jake scanned them with his view-finder, hoping to see Peg, but all he saw were men grinning like overgrown boys. Not a single Scyth looked scratched. Sauromata went whooping off to greet her father, waving the scalp. A smiling cousin flourished her lynx-skin cap, more flotsam found on the battlefield.

Father and daughter trotted up to Jake and dismounted. Sauromata translated, "First my illiterate father apologizes for speaking through his child. He never learned a civilized tongue, but he bought slaves to teach me Persian and Greek." She rattled off a bit of Homer—Jake recognized the opening of Book XIII of the *Iliad*:

> *Zeus turned his shining eyes from strife,*
> *Seeking the horsetamers who live long and just lives;*

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Blind Homer had never seen these gentle milk-drinkers taking scalps—but Jake had gone into this wild mess with eyes wide open.

Sauromata obviously relished being in the inner ring, right at the center of things. "Secondly, my fool of a father begs forgiveness for taking sides with the Persian Magus who restored the Moon. He admits his farsighted daughter knew better. And he regrets your woman has been lost, vowing to get her back, no matter how many Greeks stand in his way." She said all this with perfect seriousness, so Jake could not tell what *she* thought about getting Peg back. Fortunately, Jake neither needed nor wanted Madyas's help. All he wanted was a fast horse and a clear path to the portal.

Jake's hybrid remount was back with the yurts, but the Scyths happily gave him his pick of the captured Paeonian ponies—wild little beasts, all muscle and spite. Jake took the most docile, the least likely to buck at being introduced to a bit and saddle. Sauromata helped him harness and saddle the pony, doing the last cinches herself, plainly intrigued by modern equestrian equipment—just the sort of girl to go home and invent the stirrup.

Off they clattered, with the sinking sun at their backs. Madyas kept consoling him through Sauromata, proposing plan after plan for getting Peg back (each scheme more dangerous and harebrained than the last), punctuating his promises with jolly references to flaying, decapitation, and similar Scyth pastimes. Madyas did not recognize that Peg was now a needle in a heavily armed haystack. He barely deigned to discuss the opposition, since no troops anywhere were a match for his Scyths. Had he not just handed Alexander's mounted Rangers a humbling lesson? He rattled off the short list of peoples the Scythians had humiliated: The Medes, Persians, Cimmerians, Thracians, the Black Coats, and the man-eating Androphagi. Greeks he dismissed out of hand, "Treat them like free people and Greeks are craven and untrustworthy; treat them like slaves and they are subservient and docile." Sauromata added that Greeks feared their own mothers, wives, and sisters, keeping them unarmed and locked away.

Only Huns provoked any hesitation. Father and daughter agreed that Huns were stunted savages with unclean spirits and shapeless faces, but they were hardy horse nomads and expert archers, "cruel and cunning as beasts." Did Alexander have Huns in his army?

"None that I know of," Jake admitted.

"Then it is a done thing," replied Madyas. "We will get your woman back."

Jake did not share in their wild overconfidence. The Scyths' favorite tactic, running away, was not going to beat Alexander. Sauromata's remarks about Greek treatment of women had him worrying about what would happen to Peg if he did not make it back to the portal. Alexander was renowned for his sexual restraint—which meant he *personally* did

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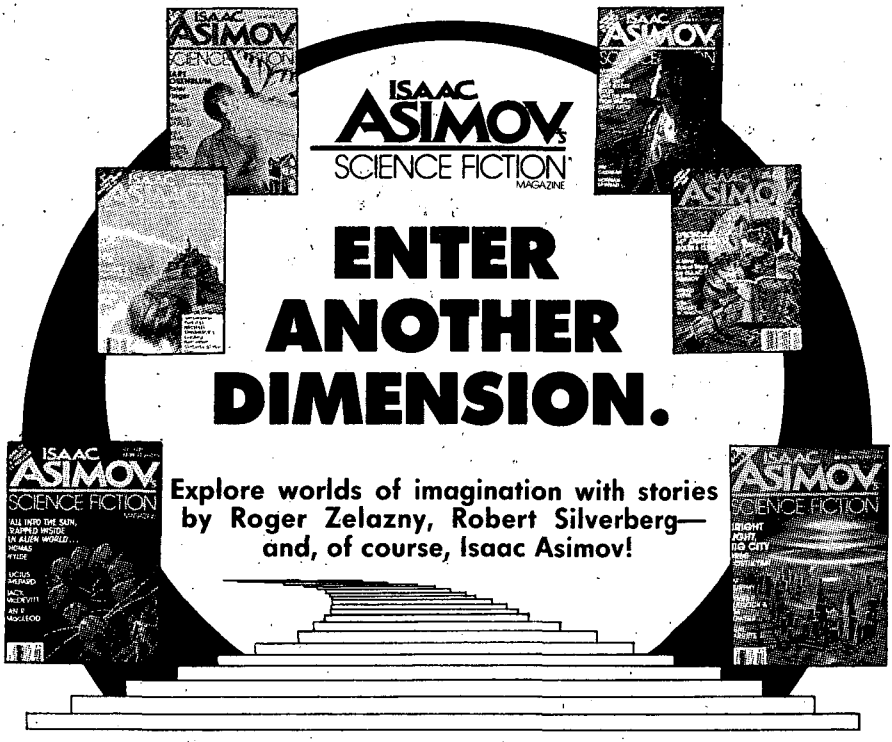
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not rape prisoners, and probably preferred boys anyway. At Issus, he had captured the Great King's field harem, including King Darius's wife, mother, daughters, and a hundred choice concubines that Darius never left home without. Darius's wife (who was also his sister) was said to be ravishing, the most beautiful woman in Asia—yet Alexander boasted that he would not even lay eyes on her. Instead he struck up a friendship with Darius's mother, Sisygambis—the Queen Mother was seventy years old, hard as a lacquered nail, and not likely to ruin the Boy-King's reputation. But this paragon among conquerors regularly turned female captives over to officers, soldiers, and slave dealers, who might not share his celebrated restraint. Or perhaps Arrian and Plutarch made it all up. Peg was in deep danger of finding out for sure. As they jogged along, Jake put in a tape entitled *The Mothers of Invention,* listening to a tune called, "Trouble Comin' Every Day." He was thinking of making it his theme song.

By the time they got to Gaugamela, Jake had changed the tape innumerable times, and was now listening to *Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young*. The Scyths emerged from one of those sudden folds in the landscape, and there was the Great King's encampment sprawled out before them, not so much an army as a great throng of peoples stretching for miles across the Grazing Place of the Camel. Though the project was blasted beyond redemption, Jake could not resist panning his recorder over the crowd. What he saw through the view-finder was awesome; a sea of tents, flanked by Tell Gomel with its village, and by low flat-topped hills rising toward the steep, rugged Jabal 'Ain-as-Satrah. Half of Asia had turned out to stop Alexander, not just Mesopotamians and Persians, but also Albanians, Arabs, Armenians, Bactrians, Capadocians, Carians, Dahans, Elamites, Greeks (fighting against their nominal overlord), Hindus, Hyrcanians, and so on down the alphabet to Tapurians, Uxians, and Zarankans. His view-finder picked out chariots, war elephants, fairhaired Aryans and black-as-night Indians, manicured Persians with gold apples on their spear butts, and tattooed savages wearing horse's manes, carrying knotted clubs and rude javelins tipped with antelope horn. Most had walked to the Plain of the Camel, coming from places as far apart as the blazing shores of the Red Sea and the frozen highlands of Central Asia.

And that was just the troops; with them were armorers, clerks, engineers, grooms, masseurs, pimps, dentists, and the like. Riding in, the Scyths were immediately assaulted by wine merchants, auctioneers, whores of both sexes and in between, all jostling each other and showing off their wares. The army was camped in a line facing west, arranged by nations, more or less in the order that they intended to fight. (The huge mass could not hope to be maneuvered; if Alexander came up behind them, everything was commanded just to turn around.) The Scyths found their families and yurts parked on the right wing, alongside some Cadusian cavalry from the Caspian Steppes. It was thought that neighboring

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people might feel better fighting side by side. Since they were westerners, they were put under Mazaeus, the westernmost Satrap.

Jake saw Sauromata in the thick of the victory celebration, helping her father with the horse sacrifice—tying a Paeonian pony's feet together with one bow string, throwing the startled pony over, calling on Tabiti, Queen of the Scythian pantheon, then strangling the thrashing animal with her second bowstring. Everyone praised her style.

During the happy feast, Jake sat like Banquo's Ghost, glumly watching slaves and peasants dutifully leveling the ground in front of the army, making it flat as a parade *maidan* so that no bumps would disturb the coming battle. On the ride, he had stuffed himself on high-energy granola-honey bars from his saddle bag, so that he only picked at his boiled horse. Madyas's victory over the Paeonians was trivial—so minor the pro-Macedonian historians had managed to bury it. (Winners always write the history, which is why so much of it is wrong.) Meantime, the Persian regulars had taken their usual drubbing from the Companions. In a few days, the whole huge army would be fleeing in terror, climbing the hills, swimming the Khajir and the Zab, with Alexander's cavalry and barbarian irregulars cutting them down from behind. Somehow, Jake had to extract himself before that happened.

Nor was he cheered when Madyas insisted they swear a blood oath to rescue his woman from those thieving Greeks. Madyas filled a large earthenware bowl with wine, then pricked both his and Jake's arms with his dagger. Only human blood was good enough for the gods. Normally, that would have hurt, but Jake was dazed and exhausted enough to be beyond pain. As he applied antiseptic (no telling where Madyas' dagger had *been*), Sauromata eagerly slashed her own arm, saying she should share in the vow.

His hawk face shining with happy madness, Madyas mixed the blood into the wine, adding a sword, some arrows, Sauromata's battle-ax, and a javelin taken from the Paeonians; all the while giving the Scyth pantheon a stern talking-to, telling the heavenly crew to bless the coming battle and keep a sharp eye out for their children, particularly Jake and Peg—then the three of them downed the bloody concoction. Madyas and his wild daughter meant well, but Jake's wine-numbed brain was already working on a way to weasel out of the coming battle. He watched Sauromata's hair shine in the firelight, picturing her pinned to the dirt by a Macedonian lance, coughing blood and clawing at the wound. One more reason to leave this party early. He felt a real fondness for the wild young woman who had saved his life, and made his day. He figured the attraction was only about 90 percent physical—but the ten percent that did *not* come from below the waist was tempered by knowing that they had absolutely nothing in common. What could a mature, bankrupt time guide and docudrama producer have in common with a teenager who took scalps and strangled horses? Better to leave now, before he had to watch Sauromata die.

So he slipped out a day later, without giving Madyas an explanation

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or Sauromata a torrid goodbye. He paused only to get a last sweeping recording of the grand encampment from the slopes of Tell Gomel. By the time he passed the Jabal 'Ain-as-Satrah, Jake had washed his hands of the whole Gaugamela project, turning his attention towards Lake Van. He had plenty of rations (both his and Peg's), and the Savage was in his saddle scabbard—like Abbas said, he could use it to shoot for the pot. Riding his spare mount and using the Paeonian horse for a pack pony, he made splendid time.

It took all of a day and a half for Sauromata to track him down. He was already high in the hills, camped by a fast stream in a forest of ancient cedars. She came riding up in cuirass and lynx skin cap, eyes flashing, swinging her Saca battle-ax. That meant she wanted to talk—if she had been merely angry, she would have shot him down from the cedars that lined the trail. Waving her *sagaris* in his face, she demanded, "Why are you running?"

"I am not really running." He stood up slowly, not wanting to antagonize her further. He had actually been lounging by the fire, smothering "Powdered Eggs Benedict" with a packet of hollandaise sauce. His flak jacket was hanging open, but he had a stunner on his hip.

She gave a sarcastic snort.

"It is not my fight," he objected. "I have other obligations."

"Like keeping your skin unpunctured? I saw you fleeing from the Paeonians, bawling like a bull calf about to be gelded."

"Listen, this won't do any good. You'll never understand me, but I'll try once, then give up." It was probably a bad mistake to bring Peg into this, but he owed Sauromata the truth. "Peg is my partner. When a man's partner is in trouble, he's supposed to do something about it. No matter how he feels, he's supposed to do something." Jake tilted his head towards the north. "Up there I can call on powerful help. Help that can free her."

Sauromata dismounted, looking as fierce as the lynx eyes on her cap. "Being a great magus does not mean you may insult me, and insult my father."

"I did not mean to insult. I only mean to solve my own problems." Girl, he thought, you have enough problems, like the thrashing Alexander is getting ready to hand you. It hurt to see her standing there, so brave and beautiful, knowing that he had left her to fight a losing battle. But what could he do with her? He could stun her and lug her back to the portal with him. Imagine what the reaction team would say if he came in lugging a teenage Amazon who would not let him alone. It would be silly enough coming back without *Peg*. He could hear the hot-shots assigned to STOP. ("Peg stolen by Paeonians? Lost Abbas too? *And* blew your project? Ain't *that* the luck. Nice little number you got in exchange, though.") People were already saying that *Time Tours* was losing the touch, starting to stumble about in the past. ("Some folks ain't safe to let loose in last week.")

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"Why are you so anxious to get Peg back? You know she and I are lovers." Were lovers. Whatever.

Sauromata's anger dissolved in laughter. "And I am the lovestruck maiden, trembling that you might touch another woman, fearing she will feel the slippery oil you anointed my thighs with? You were wonderful, Oh Mighty Magus, *but not that wonderful.*"

Not *that* wonderful. He could see them carving it on his headstone, if he did not end up in some common battlefield grave. *(Stranger, go tell the Future that here lies Jake Bento—he wasn't* that *wonderful, and he fucked up again.)* She stood face to face with him, pride flowing out of every pore. "We swore a blood oath to get your woman back—but you think my family's bows are too feeble. You must use your magic before ever giving us a chance."

"I swear by all my powers as a Magus that the Greeks are going to win." As plainly and simply as he could Jake outlined the immense disaster awaiting Darius' army. Instead of trying to hold the steep banks of the Tigris, or cutting Alexander's tenuous supply line with cavalry, or doing any of a dozen sensible things, Darius was going to meet a master tactician (who had whipped him before) on a manicured battlefield. Jake assured her, "At this time, in this place, Alexander is unbeatable."

She looked him gravely in the eye, replying in Greek:

> *"Should I strip off my armor,*
> *So he might kill me naked like a woman . . ."*

Homer again, Hector's last speech by the Sacian Gate, *"held fast in the shackles of his fate."* Homer's heroes may have been vain, thieving drunkards and rapists, but they understood space-time and destiny—better than Mohammed Abbas had. Sauromata had Jake seeing Temporal Shock symptoms in himself. STOP procedure and the abstract certainty of Darius's defeat faded before the vital image of this warm living woman. He realized he was not going to let her go back alone. Somehow he would save her (and Peg). I am *not* suffering from Time Fatigue, he told himself. (Denial being the first and most common symptom.) I *know* the battle is lost, but I have to see Sauromata safely through this rout—*then* I can get Peg.

Just to prove he had some control, Jake took his time returning to the Grazing Place of the Camel, trotting along on horseback in time to Janis Joplin singing "Me and Bobby Magee"—assuring Sauromata that he would get her to the catastrophe on time. All he cared about was leaving time enough for love on the way. Even if it was *not that wonderful,* it was good enough for *him*, and, win or lose, he expected this would be the last.

The night before Gaugamela, the whole plain between the River Khajir and the heights was agleam with watchfires. Tall cressets lit the camps, and the confused murmur from thousands of throats, speaking dozens

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of tongues, sounded like the surging of a great dark ocean—by now the army and its menagerie of camels, elephants, hawks, dogs, mules, and horses had been sitting in the same spot for over a week; the stench alone was awe-inspiring.

Madyas said nothing about Jake's running away, greeting him as easily as if Jake had just gone off to piss. Scyths thoroughly understand the impulse to flee. Sauromata translated all of Jake's misgivings about the battle. Madyas only smiled, "Boy, we mean to do our best tomorrow; but the yurts are already on the road to Ecbatana." Jake looked about and saw no yurts, no flocks, no dirty-faced children. There was nothing he could teach the Scyths about being ready to run.

With total calamity only hours away, Darius was already acting snake-bit. Having constructed no proper camp defenses, the king was in a fine panic, ordering everyone who would listen to stand to arms, spending half the night conducting torchlight reviews, making sure none of his troops were rested. Jake dialed a trank from his medikit so he could get some sleep. He *knew* Alexander would not move until morning.

Plutarch records that Alexander slept so soundly before the battle that Parmenion had to stand by his bed and shout "Alexander" several times to wake him. (Alexander eventually had Parmenion executed just on general principles.) With chemical assistance, Jake slept equally well. It was Sauromata who woke him. (On waking, Alexander is supposed to have said, "The battle is already won." *Jake* said, "All right, all right, I'm up. How about hopping in the sleeping bag with me?") If Jake had slept well, it looked like no one else had; the whole huge army was hungry and bleary-eyed, having waited all night for an attack that was only now developing.

Climbing onto his horse, Jake broke out a portable heater he kept for such emergencies, introducing the Scyths to instant coffee. It would have taken a lake of coffee to undo the damage King Darius had done with his midnight parades, but Madyas was so pleased he offered some magic of his own, producing a small leather bag (not one made from human skin, Jake was happy to note). The Scyth shook out a handful of dried black caps with long white stems. Sauromata translated, "He says to eat these."

"On an empty stomach? What are they?"

"Mushrooms." Madyas began to munch on them himself, washing them down with coffee.

Jake looked dubious. "What do they do for you?"

Sauromata smiled. "Father says, first you hear frogs chirping, then you see gods."

To be sociable he took a few, dosing himself with a general anti-toxin just to be safe. Sauromata sampled the coffee but not the mushrooms. She was young, and took her battles very seriously.

His flak jacket open, Jake propped up one knee and rolled a smoke, surveying Alexander's army as it advanced toward them. He could see the phalanx rolling forward beneath their towering pikes. The Mace-

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donian wing closest to him was screened by blocks of Greek cavalry and barbarian mercenaries arranged checkerboard fashion. As he came on, Alexander angled his troops in echelon toward Jake's left, which was encouraging. Darius's line was so long that any movement to the left took the enemy away from Jake.

"Look, they are leaving!" Sauromata shouted. She seemed to think their worst problem was that Alexander might get away.

"They are going to hit Bessus' flank," Madyas said; he too had spotted the movement. Too bad for Bessus, thought Jake, as he lit the smoke and handed it around. The left flank was where the fight would start. Arrian was sketchy about events on the right, so Jake would have to take the bumps as they came. He planned to protect Sauromata and Madyas as well as he could, then all three of them could join in the general scramble to the rear. The Scyths could head for their *kishlak,* their winter camp on the Sea of Grass. He could angle off toward Lake Van.

As he sat there, inhaling *ganja* and digesting the mushrooms, he got that old *deja vu* feeling again (another Time Shock symptom). He heard the snake-eyed Californian who sold him the flak jackets, saying they were "Number One souvenirs" from another huge army in another dubious battle. The guy had not been able to explain to Jake what the twentieth century war was about, but he said that didn't matter. "We got B-52s and bulldozers, helicopters with hi-fi speakers. Stuff the gooks never even fuckin' *heard* of." Mesopotamia was not so far from Mendocino. The Great King's horde had elephants and chariots, heavy armored horse archers, and things the Greeks had never even fuckin' heard of. All *Alexander* had were tested veterans, who knew what they were doing and why they were fighting. There was a lesson there. And Darius was about to learn it—damn lot of *good* it would do him. (Bessus eventually had Darius executed on general principles.)

Someone shouted, "There goes Bessus!" Through his 3V view-finder, Jake saw Bessus's Bactrians attacking on the far left, followed by Asiatic Scyths, then regular Persian horse from the center of the line. Men and horses are herd animals, and once a mass of cavalry gets moving, others tend to follow, unless firmly held in check. Nothing about the Great King's formation was firm. The chariots went flashing forward, churning up dust, their scythe blades whirling like tremendous mowing machines. The Macedonians opened their formation to let them through, then closed ranks and kept on coming.

As they closed up, Jake saw a shiver move along the Macedonian line, pikes coming down, preparing to meet a charge. Cavalry alongside Jake started to canter forward—because of the mushrooms and the view-finder's narrow angle, Jake actually thought for a moment he was moving backward. Then the Armenians and Cappadocians ahead of him thundered away, and Jake was suddenly in the front rank. Horses reared and plunged around him. Sauromata yelped with excitement. Madyas's eyes narrowed.

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This is it. Jake's throat tightened so much that he found it hard to breathe. He fumbled to close his flak jacket. In a moment he would hurtle into the melee ahead. From here on, it was free fall, so stick close to Sauromata. The Savage was tucked in its saddle scabbard, and he had a stunner on each hip (as well as one in his saddle bag.) If they gave a prize at Gaugamela for the most prepared participant, he should win the gold.

Suddenly, Madyas gave a shout, waving his bow to send the Scyths surging ahead. Jake was so surprised they nearly left him behind, but Sauromata jerked his reins, dragging him forward. "Wait!" he hollered in astonishment, "What about orders?" There had been no message from Mazaeus, the wing commander. Madyas, the old fool, was whooping off on his own.

"Fuck orders!" yelled the girl. "Follow my father!"

Jake thought that Madyas must be gone on mushrooms and *ganja*—or too much instant coffee. Whatever the reason, they were pelting ahead, first Madyas and his kin, then the rest of the Scyths, and even the Cadusian cavalry they were brigaded with—all dragged forward by enthusiasm and herd instinct.

Jake had to follow, trying to keep up with his horse. Madyas catapulted straight from canter to full gallop, which was going to make it hellishly hard to turn when the time came. But turn they must, because Alexander had marched so far to the left that there were actually no Macedonians to their front, just open plain. Jake found himself looking sideways at the battle raging off to his left. Madyas must intend to take the Macedonians on the flank, but he had started a stampede that would be near impossible to maneuver.

As the end of Alexander's line drew even with them, Jake could see Greek and barbarian horsemen looking grim and efficient through the 3V finder. They were swept back at an angle to the main line, set to counter-charge when the Scyths turned. The bastards knew their business, and Madyas was insane if he thought he'd surprise them.

Still Madyas forged ahead, going hell-for-leather, shouting in Scythian. Alexander's flank dropped behind them. By now the battle was not to their left, but so far in back of them that Jake had to crane his neck to see the action. Ahead lay open landscape and low heights. Madyas must be totally strung out, insanely attacking some phantom foe only he could see. The real battle was fast becoming a smudge of dust far to their rear. Jake tried to draw even with the wild old man to ask where the hell they were going, but he hadn't a snail's chance of catching the hurtling Scythian. It was all he could do to stay even with Sauromata. They pounded over one rise, then another, losing the battle altogether. If Madyas had some crazed notion of catching Alexander from behind, he should have doubled back ages ago.

Then they topped a final rise, and Jake saw newly turned earth studded with a palisade of stakes. Lines of carts covered the gaps in the earthworks. This could only be the Macedonian camp. Understanding burst

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over him. Like any sensible Scyth, Madyas was skipping the preliminaries—no matter *how* the main fight went, he would start by looting Alexander's tents and baggage.

Jake realized with a bit of a shock that Peg might actually be just ahead of him. He was not prepared for this. Certain they would be beaten, he was set to rescue Peg *only if* he survived, and *only if* he got to Lake Van. It had never occurred to him that Madyas might succeed against all expectation. Now he was in imminent danger of running right into her, on a head full of mushrooms, with Sauromata at his side.

Jake was not the only one surprised. The Macedonians were flabbergasted to find several thousand nomads charging straight down on them, with the invincible Boy-King nowhere in sight. The Scyths and Cadusians gave the camp guard no time to recover; firing from the saddle, they smothered one section of earthwork with arrows, while Madyas and his kin dashed in to rope several of the carts blocking the nearest gap. Protected by their armor from the feeble counter-fire, they pulled the carts out of line. Mounted nomads poured through the gap and down the lanes of tents.

Jake rode with them, amazed by the ease of it all. Darius might be losing his battle back on the Grazing Place of the Camel, but these horse barbarians were winning the only fight that mattered to *them*. Madyas was grinning at him, jabbering in Scythian and pointing with his bow. Jake turned to Sauromata, "What's he saying?"

"He says make for the harem tent, the big one that used to belong to Darius." Smack in the center of camp was a silk circus tent with braided gold tassels, easily the largest and most colorful in the encampment.

Scyths were already at the entrance, but they stepped aside for Madyas. Jake stumbled in after him, legs unsteady from the frenzied ride. Heavy folds of silk cut off the clatter of hooves and the sounds of loothing. It was as if he had stepped into a garish Paradise, with soft divans, Persian carpets, curtained alcoves piled with plush cushions, and women everywhere—young women, old women, and girls, wearing long dresses, ornate robes, or satin trousers. The air was an enticing haze of incense, perfume, and the odor of women's bodies kept in close confinement. A few eunuchs fluttered about trying to protect their charges, but they were armed with nothing worse than fly whisks. Lap dogs yapped at him from between trim ankles. Jake felt silly invading this combination *Arabian Nights* fantasy and overdone women's dressing room.

Sitting in the center on a high throne was a stiff, aged matron in regal headgear. Two young girls held tight to her skirts. If she was afraid, the old lady did not show it; she fixed Jake and Madyas with an unflinching glare, telling them to get the hell out in fine court Persian.

This haughty battle-ax had to be Sisygambis, Queen Mother of Persia, captured by Alexander at Issus. Jake tried to put her at ease. "We are from your son's army, here to set you free."

"How fortunate for us." Sisygambis lifted a purple eyebrow. Standing there, stunner in his hand, wearing his BORN TO BE WILD flak jacket,

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Jake realized he might not be all the Queen Mother expected in a Persian trooper. She sniffed with intense disinterest. "My dear barbarian, if you have beaten Alexander, then we do not need to be 'freed,' for we are quite comfortable here. If you have *not* beaten him, then by all means *do* so, *and quit bothering us.*"

Then he saw a Peg, wearing a short Greek tunic and harem pants, standing in a corner and taking in the whole scene with her 3V recorder. She lowered her instrument, walked over and salaamed to Sisygambis, fixing her gaze on the Queen's gold slippers. (Jake realized he had oafishly trod all over protocol—hard to avoid when you are sacking and pillaging.) "Mother of Asia," Peg intoned, "it is me this man has come for."

The Queen Mother gave Peg a solicitous glance. "Child, you need not go with this mad barbarian."

Peg kept her eyes downcast, "Alas, this mad barbarian is my husband." She salaamed again, "Your Grace. Please give my farewell to Alexander when you see him."

The crone softened. "Child, we will miss you; but if it rids us of these men, then by all means, be gone." Peg backed out of the Queen's presence.

As soon as Jake had hustled Peg out of the harem tent, Sauromata came trotting up, leading a spare horse. Jake had not even thought of stealing one, but Sauromata seemed to think of everything, and Scyths are born horse thieves. Sauromata gave Peg an easy woman-to-woman smile that spoke volumes, then coolly pulled aside, making room beside Jake.

As Jake helped Peg mount, she looked from the girl to him, "So that's the way it is, is it?"

Jake felt flustered, and nodded. He was never at his best hiding things from Peg. "Well, yes, I suppose it *is.*" To cover his embarrassment, he scrambled aboard his own horse.

Peg tapped him on the helmet. "Your recorder's not running." It was just like her to cut straight from sex to business.

Jake shrugged, "Well, it did seem the project was shot. Besides, I have been rather busy." He waved his arm to indicate the Scyths running wild, industriously emptying the camp.

"No," she shook her head, "*I'm* the one who's been busy." She panned her recorder over the carnage around them, adding, in an offhand way, "You know, all those stories about Alexander being *only* interested in boys . . . well, I can tell you from *very personal* experience that they are *highly* exaggerated."

"Oh, really?"

She lowered her recorder, looking right at him. "And did anyone ever tell you that I reminded them of Olympias, Alexander's mother?"

"No, none of our friends have mentioned it."

"Well, *Alexander* said so, and *he* has a complex that makes Oedipus look like daddy's boy." She flourished her 3V recorder. "And it's all in *here.*"

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"Well, shit," Jake glanced at Sauromata, "I should have kept my recorder running, just for comparison."

"No loss," Peg tossed her head. "Only the most hopeless pervert would want to watch you screw some teenage ninja tomboy." She leaned over, stabbing his flak jacket with her finger. "But *Six Torrid Days and Nights* in the harem of Alexander, the bisexual Boy-King on his way to conquer Persia—*that's* a real story. And *Time Tours* is going to take them there!" ●

NEXT ISSUE

Our next issue, our huge November issue, is another of our Special Double Issues—and, at the risk of redundancy, let me say that we think you'll find that *this* Special Double Issue is a very *special* Special Issue indeed. Our cover story is by **Isaac Asimov,** and is a historic event in itself: "Forward the Foundation," the first new Foundation novella in more than forty-one years! If you're a fan of the Foundation series, the most popular series in the history of science fiction (voted a special Hugo Award as "best all-time series" by the 1966 Worldcon), nothing more needs to be said. If somehow you've never heard of the Foundation series (and just where *have* you been living, anyway?), then you have an even more exciting treat in store for you, as Isaac introduces you to the world-spanning city of Trantor, and to Hari Seldon, master of the secret, forbidden science of Psychohistory, and then pits him against his greatest challenge, one that could ruin all his carefully drawn plans, one that may be too formidable even for Hari Seldon to overcome....

And is that all? Hell no! Although "Forward the Foundation" is a very long novella, almost novel-length, we managed to jam *another* huge, almost novel-length novella into the November issue as well. This one is by flamboyant new writer **Phillip C. Jennings,** and in "The Fourth Intercometary" he sweeps us away to a bizarre Mars of the not-too-distant future, a partially terraformed Mars swarming with strange genetically altered (and politically opposed) races, a Mars where people switch identities from body to body as casually as we change our clothes, and dreams can be plucked from trees and eaten... and then hurtles us through a brawling, intricate, fast-paced story packed with enough bizarre new ideas for any *other* writer's four-volume trilogy.

But wait, there's *more*! No, we don't have a set of steak knives for you, but just look at what else we *do* have:

ALSO IN NOVEMBER: multiple Nebula and Hugo-winner **Robert Silverberg** takes us sideways in time to a world where the Roman Empire never died, for an evocative tale of palace politics and sexual intrigue set against the exotic background of "An Outpost of the Empire"; **Walter Jon Williams** takes us to a ruthless high-tech future for a fast-paced thriller that embroils us in a deadly web of vanity, greed, and murder, in the hard-hitting "Erogenoscape";

(continued on page 95)

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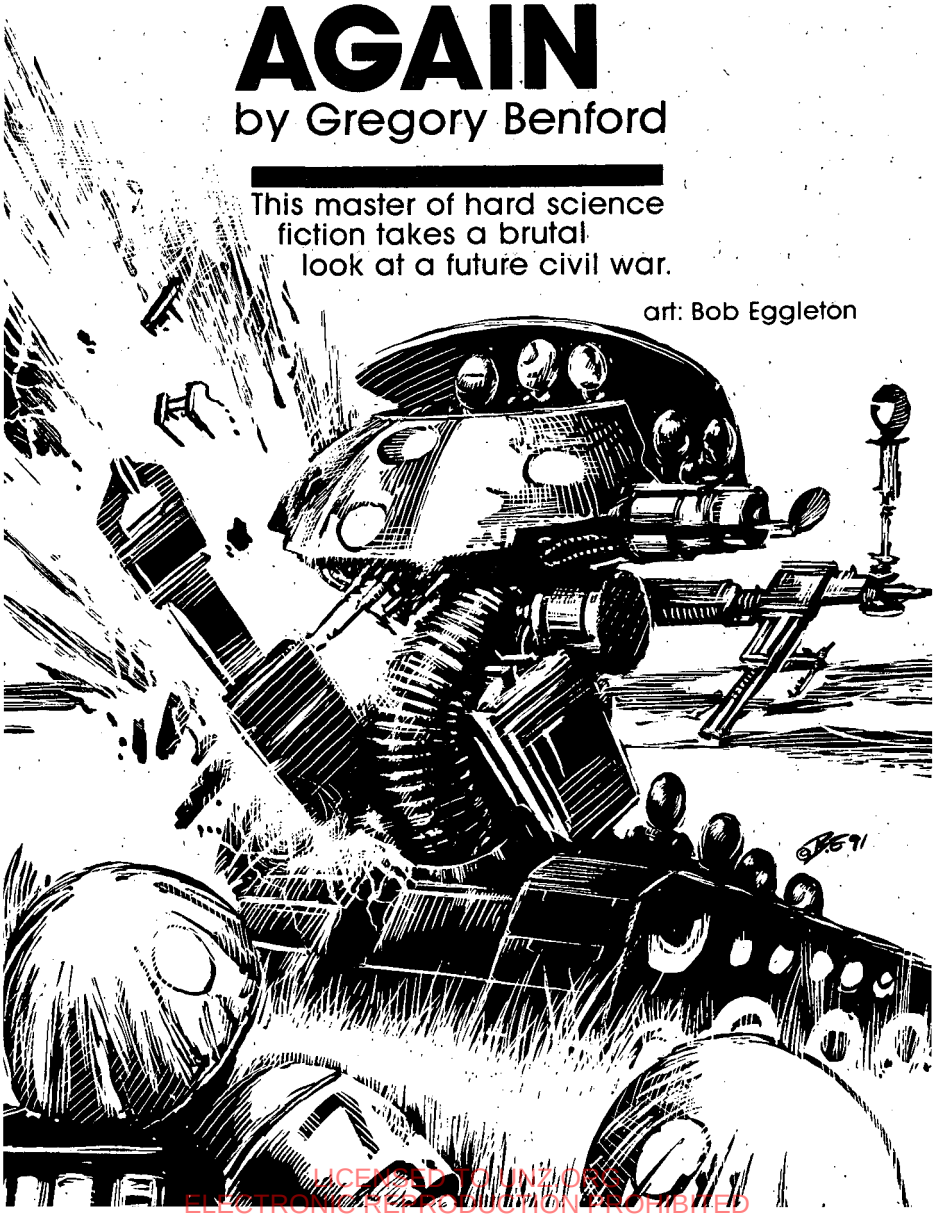
MANASSAS, AGAIN

by Gregory Benford

This master of hard science fiction takes a brutal look at a future civil war.

art: Bob Eggleton



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There were worse things than getting swept up in the first battle of the first war in over a century, but Bradley could not right away think of any.

They had been out on a lark, really. Bradley got his buddy Paul to go along, flying low over the hills to watch the grand formations of men and machines. Bradley knew how to keep below the radar screens, sometimes skimming along so close to the treetops that branches snapped on their understruts. They had come in before dawn, using Bradley's Dad's luxury, ultra-quiet cruiser—over the broad fields, using the sunrise to blind the optical sensors below.

It had been enormously exciting. The gleaming columns, the acrid smoke of ruin, the distant muffled coughs of combat.

Then somebody shot them down.

Not a full, square hit, luckily. Bradley had gotten them over two ranges of hills, lurching through shot-wracked air. Then they came down heavily, air bags saving the two boys.

They had no choice but to go along with the team which picked them out of their wreckage. Dexter, a big swarthy man, seemed to be in charge. He said, "We got word a bunch of mechs are comin' along this road. You stick with us, you can help out."

Bradley said irritably, "Why should we? I want to—"

"'Cause it's not safe 'round here, kid," Dexter said. "You joyriding rich kids, maybe you'll learn something about that today."

Dexter grinned, showing two missing teeth, and waved the rest of his company to keep moving into the slanting early morning glow.

Nobody had any food and Bradley was pretty sure they would not have shared it out if they had. The fighting over the ridge to the west had disrupted whatever supply lines there were into this open, once agricultural land.

They reached the crossroads by mid morning and right away knocked out a servant mech by mistake. It saw them come hiking over the hill through the thick oaks and started chuffing away, moving as fast as it could. It was an R class, shiny and chromed.

A woman who carried one of the long rods over her shoulder whipped the rod down and sighted along it and a loud boom startled Bradley. The R mech went down. "First one of the day," the woman named Angel said.

"Musta been a scout," Dexter said.

"For what?" Bradley asked, shocked as they walked down the slope toward the mech in air still cool and moist from the dawn.

Paul said tentatively, "The mech withdrawal?"

Dexter nodded. "Mechs're on their way through here. Bet they're scared plenty."

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They saw the R mech had a small hole punched through it right in the servo controls near the back. "Not bad shootin'," a man said to Angel.

"I *tole* you these'd work," Angel said proudly. "I sighted mine in fresh this mornin'. It helps."

Bradley realized suddenly that the various machined rods these dozen people carried were all weapons, fabrications turned out of factories exclusively human-run. *Killing tools*, he thought in blank surprise. *Like the old days. You see them in dramas and stuff, but they've been illegal for a century.*

"Maybe this mech was just plain scared," Bradley said. "It's got software for that."

"We sent out a beeper warning," Dexter said, slapping the pack on his back. "Goes out of this li'l rig here. Any mech wants no trouble, all they got to do is come up on us slow and then lie down so we can have a look at their programming cubes."

"Disable it?"

"Sure. How else we going to be sure?"

"This one ran, clear as anything," Angel said, reloading her rifle.

"Maybe it didn't understand," Bradley said. The R models were deft, subtle, terrific at social graces.

"It knew, all right," Angel said, popping the mech's central port open and pulling out its ID cube. "Look, it's from Sanfran."

"What's it doing all the way out here, then, if it's not a rebel?" a black man named Nelson asked.

"Yeah," Dexter said. "Enter it as reb." He handed Bradley a wrist comm. "We're keeping track careful now. You'll be busy just takin' down score today, kid."

"Rebel, uh, I see," Bradley said, tapping into the comm. It was reassuring to do something simple while he straightened out his feelings.

"You bet," Nelson said, excitement lacing his voice. "Look at it. Fancy mech, smarter than most of them, tryin' to save itself. It's been runnin' away from our people. They just broke up a big mech force west of here."

"I never could afford one of these chrome jobs," Angel said. "They knew that, too. I had one of these classy R numbers mean-mouth me in the market, try to grab a can of soybean stew." She laughed sarcastically. "That was when there was a few scraps left on the shelves."

"Elegant thing, wasn't it?" Nelson kicked the mech, which rolled farther downhill.

"You messed it up pretty well," Bradley said.

Dexter said, "Roll it down into that hollow so nobody can see it from the road." He gestured at Paul. "You go with the other party. Hey, Mercer!"

A tall man ambled over from where he had been carefully trying to

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pick the spines off a prickly pear growing in a gully. Everybody was hungry. Dexter said to him, "Go down across the road and set up shop. Take this kid—Paul's your name, right?—he'll help with the grunt work. We'll catch 'em in a cross fire here."

Mercer went off with Paul. Bradley helped get the dead mech going and with Angel rolled it into the gully. Its flailing arms dug fresh wet gouges in the spring grass. The exposed mud exhaled moist scents. They threw manzanita brush over the shiny carcass to be sure and by that time Dexter had deployed his people.

They were setting up what looked like traps of some kind well away from the blacktop crossroads. Bradley saw that this was to keep the crossroads from looking damaged or clogged. They wanted the mechs to come in fast and keep going.

As he worked he heard tolling bass notes, like the mumbles of a giant, come from the horizon. He could see that both the roads leading to the crossroads could carry mechs away from the distant battles. Dexter was everywhere, barking orders, Bradley noted with respect.

The adults talked excitedly to each other about what the mechs would make of it, how easy they were to fool about real-world stuff, and even threw in some insider mech slang—codes and acronyms that meant very little to mechs, really, but had gotten into the pop culture as hip new stuff. Bradley smiled at this. It gave him a moment of feeling superior to cover his uneasiness.

It was a crisp spring morning now that the sun had beamed up over the far hill at their backs. The perfect time for fresh growth, but the fields beyond had no plowing or signs of cultivation. Mechs should be there, laying in crops. Instead they were off over the rumpled ridgeline, clashing with the main body of humans and, Bradley hoped secretly, getting their asses kicked. Though mechs had no asses, he reminded himself.

Dexter and Bradley laid down behind a hummock halfway up the hill. Dexter was talking into his hushmike headset, face jumping with anticipation and concern. Bradley savored the rich scents of the sweet new grass and thought idly about eating some of it.

Dexter looked out over the setup his team was building and said, "Y'know, maybe we're too close but I figure you can't be in too close as long as you have the fire power. These weapons, we need close, real close. Easier to hit them when they're moving fast but then it's easier for them to hit you, too."

Bradley saw that the man was more edgy here than he had been with his team. Nobody had done anything like this within living memory. Not in the civilized world, anyway.

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"Got to be sure we can back out of this if it gets too hot," Dexter went on.

Bradley liked Dexter's no-nonsense scowl. "How did you learn how to fight?"

Dexter looked surprised. "Hobby of mine. Studied the great Roman campaigns in Africa, in Asia, then here against the Indians."

"They used ambushes a lot?"

"Sometimes. Of course, after Sygnius of Albion invented the steam-driven machine gun, well sir, then the Romans could dictate terms to any tribes that gave them trouble." Dexter squinted at him. "You study history, kid?"

"I'm Bradley, sir. My parents don't let me read about battles very much. They're always saying we've gotten beyond that."

"Yeah, that Universal Peace Church, right?"

"Yessir. They say—"

"That stuff's fine for people. Mechs, they're different."

"Different how?"

Dexter sucked on his teeth, peering down the road. "Not human. Fair game."

"Think they'll be hard to beat?"

Dexter grinned. "We're programmed for this by a couple million years of evolution. They been around half a century."

"Since 1800? I thought we'd always had mechs."

"Geez, kids never know any history."

"Well sir, I know all the big things, like the dates of American Secession from the Empire, and the Imperial ban on weapons like the ones you've got here, and how—"

"Dates aren't history, son. They're just numbers. What's it matter when we finally got out from under the Romans? Bunch of lily-livers, they were. 'Peace Empire'—contradiction in terms, kid. Though the way the 3D pumps you kids full of crap, not even allowin' any war shows or anything, except for prettified pussy historicals, no wonder you don't know which end of a gun does the business."

This seemed unfair to Bradley but he could see Dexter wasn't the kind of man he had known, so he shut up. *Fair game?* What did that mean? A fair game was where everybody enjoyed it and had a chance to win.

Maybe the world wasn't as simple as he had thought. There was something funny and tingly about the air here, a crackling that made his skin jump, his nerves strum.

Angel came back and lay beside them, wheezing, lugging a heavy contraption with tripod legs they had just assembled.

Nelson was down slope, cradling his rifle. He arranged the tripod and lifted onto it a big array of cylinders and dark, brushed-steel sliding

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parts unlike anything Bradley had ever seen. Sweating, Nelson stuck a long curved clip into all this freshly made metal and worked the clacking mechanism. Nelson smiled, looking pleased at the way the parts slid easily.

Bradley was trying to figure out what all the various weapons did when he heard something coming fast down the road. He looked back along the snaky black line that came around the far hills and saw a big shape flitting among the ash trees.

It was an open-topped hauler filled with copper-jacketed mechs. They looked like factory hands, packed like gleaming eggs in a carton.

Dexter talked into his hushmike and pointed toward three chalk-white stones set up by the road as aiming markers. The hauler came racing through the crossroads and plunged up the straight section of the road in front of Bradley. The grade increased here so they would slow as they passed the stones.

Bradley realized they had no way of knowing what the mechs were doing there, not for sure, and then he forgot that as a pulse-quickening sensation coursed through him. Dexter beside him looked like a cat that knows he has a canary stashed somewhere and can go sink his teeth into it any time he likes.

When the hauler reached the marker stones Angel opened fire. The sound was louder than anything Bradley had ever heard and his first reaction was to bury his face in the grass. When he looked up the hauler was slewing across the road and then it hit the ditch and rolled.

The coppery mechs in the back flew out in slow motion. Most just smacked into the grass and lay still. The hauler thumped solidly and stopped rolling. A few of the factory mechs got up and tried to get behind the hauler, maybe thinking that the rifle fire was only from Angel, but then the party from across the road opened up and the mechs pitched forward into the ditch and did not move. Then there was quiet in the little valley. Bradley could hear the hauler's engine still humming with electric energy and then some internal override cut in and it whined into silence.

"I hit that hauler square in the command dome, you see that?" Angel said loudly.

Bradley hadn't seen it but he said, "Yes Ma'm, right."

Dexter said, "Try for that every time. Saves ammo if we don't have to shoot every one of them."

Nelson called up the slope, "Those're factory mechs, they look like Es and Fs, they're pretty heavy built."

Angel nodded, grinning. "Easier to just slam 'em into that ditch."

Dexter didn't hear this as he spoke into his hush mike next to Bradley. "Myron, you guys get them off the road. Use those power override keys

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and make them walk themselves into that place where the gully runs down into the stream. Tell 'em to jump right in the water."

"What about the hauler?" Bradley asked, and then was surprised at his own boldness.

Dexter frowned a moment. "The next batch, they'll think we hit it from the air. There was plenty of that yesterday to the west."

"I didn't see any of our planes today," Bradley said.

"We lost some. Rest are grounded because some mechs started to catch on, just about sunset. They knocked three of our guys right out of the sky. Mechs won't know that, though. They'll figure it's like yesterday and that hauler was just unlucky." Dexter smiled and checked his own rifle, which he had not fired.

"I'll go help them," Bradley said, starting to get up.

"No, we only got so many of those keys. The guys know how to use 'em. You watch the road."

"But I'd like to—"

"Shut up," Dexter said in a way that was casual and yet was not.

Bradley used his pocket binoculars to study the road. The morning heat sent ripples climbing up from the valley floor and he was not sure at first that he saw true movement several kilometers away and then he was. Dexter alerted the others and there was a mad scramble to get the mechs out of sight.

They were dead, really, but the humans could access their power reserves and make them roll down the road on their wheels and treads and then jounce down the gully and pitch into the stream. Bradley could hear laughter as the team across the road watched the mechs splash into the brown water. Some shorted out and started flailing their arms and rotors around, comic imitations of humans swimming. That lasted only a few seconds and then they sank like the rest.

Nelson came running back up the hill carrying on his back a long tube. "Here's that launcher you wanted. Rensink, he didn't look too happy to let go of it."

Dexter stood and looked down the road with his own binoculars. "Leave it here. We got higher elevation than Rensink."

Dexter took the steel tube, which looked to Bradley exactly like the telescopes he and his friends used to study the sky. Tentatively Bradley said, "If you're not going to use that rifle, uh, sir, I'd . . ."

Dexter grinned. "You want in, right?"

"Well, yes, I thought that since you're—"

"Sure. Here. Clip goes like this," he demonstrated, "you hold it so, sight along that notch. I machined that so I know it's good. We had to learn a whole lot of oldtimey craft to make these things."

Bradley felt the heft and import of the piece and tentatively practiced

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sighting down at the road. He touched the trigger with the caution of a virgin lover. If he simply pulled on the cool bit of metal a hole would—well, might—appear in the carapace of a fleeing mech. A mech they would not have to deal with again in the chaos to come. It was a simple way to think about the whole complex issue. Something in Bradley liked that simplicity.

The mechs still had not arrived but Bradley could see them well enough through the binoculars now to know why. They were riding on self-powered inventions of their own, modified forms of the getarounds mechs sometimes used on streets. These were three-wheeled and made of shiny brass.

They were going slowly, probably running out of energy. As he watched one deployed a solar panel on its back to catch the rising sun and then the others did but this did not speed them up any. They did not look like the elegant social mechs he usually saw zipping on the bike paths, bound on some errand. They were just N- or P-class mechs who had rigged up some wheels.

They came pedaling into the crossroads, using their arms. The one in front saw the hauler on its side and knew something was wrong right away and started pumping hard. Nelson shot at him then even though Dexter had said nothing. He hit the lead mech and it went end over end, arms caught up in its own drive chain. Angel could not resist and she took out the next three with a burst. Then the others came in with a chorus of rattling shots and loud bangs, no weapon sounding like the other, and in the noise Bradley squeezed and felt the butt of the rifle kick him.

He had been aiming at one of the mechs at the rear of the little column and when he looked next the mech was down, sliding across the road with sparks jetting behind it, metal ripping across asphalt.

"Stop! Stop shooting!" Dexter called and in the sudden silence Bradley could hear the mechs clattering to a halt, clanging and squealing and thumping into the ditch.

"Get them off the road—quick!" Dexter called. He waved Bradley down the hill and the boy ran to see the damage. As he dashed toward them the mechs seemed to be undamaged except for some dents but then up close each showed a few holes. He had time to glance at Paul, who was red-faced, breathing hard, his eyes veiled. There was no time to talk.

The men and women from across the road got most of the mechs started up again on override keys but one had suffered some sort of internal explosion and the back was blown off. Bradley helped three men tilt it up enough to roll off the gentle rounded asphalt and once they got it going it rolled and slid into a copse of eucalyptus. They threw branches

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over it. Bradley looked for the one he had shot at but it was impossible to tell which that was now.

He felt a prickly anticipation, a thickening of the air. The fragrances of trees and grass cut into his nostrils, vivid and sharp. They ran back up the slope. Bradley found the rifle he now thought of as his and sprawled down with it in the grass, getting down behind a hummock near Dexter.

He lay there just breathing and looking at the rifle, which seemed to be made of a lot of complicated parts. Dexter tossed him three clips and a box of copper-sheathed ammunition. The box promised that they were armor-piercing. Bradley fumbled a little learning how to load the clips but then he moved quickly, sliding the rounds in with a secure click as he heard the distant growl of a tracked vehicle.

It was coming closer along the other road. The crossroads looked pretty clear, no obvious signs of the ambush.

The Mercer team had laid two mines in the road. They had a chameleon surface and within a minute were indistinguishable from the asphalt. Bradley could tell where they were because they were lined up with the white marker stones and from up here were smoother than the asphalt.

He wondered if the mechs could sense that. Their sensorium was better than human in some ways, worse in others. He realized that he had never thought very much about the interior life of a mech, any more than he could truly delve into the inner world of animals. But in principle mechs *were* knowable. Their entire perspective could be digitized and examined minutely.

The clatter and roar of the approach blotted this from his mind. "Activate!" Dexter shouted, his tight voice giving away some of his own excitement.

A big tracked vehicle came flitting through the trees that lined the black road, flickering like a video-game target. There were mechs perched all over it, hitching rides, and many more of them packed its rear platform. When Bradley looked back at the road nearby the mines jumped out at him like a spider on a lace tablecloth. The entire valley vibrated and sparkled with intense, sensory light. Smells coiled up his nostrils, the cool sheen of the rifle spoke to him through his hands.

The mech driver would surely see the mines, stop and back away, he thought. And the mechs aboard would jump off and some of them would attack the humans, rolling down the road and shooting the lasers they had adapted from industrial purposes. Bradley had heard about mechs which could override their safety commands and fight.

He tightened his grip on his rifle. He was dimly aware of Dexter sighting along his tube-shaped weapon, and of Angel muttering to herself as she waited.

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"If they were like us they'd stop, first sign of trouble they see," Dexter muttered, probably to himself but Bradley could hear. "Then they'd deploy fighter mechs on both sides of the road and they'd sweep us, outflank."

"Think they will?" Bradley asked wonderingly.

"Naw. They don't have what we do."

"What . . . what's that?" Bradley knew the wide range of special abilities mechs possessed.

"Balls."

The mechs perched atop the tracked vehicle were looking forward down the road and holding on tight against the rough swerves as they rounded curves.

Then one of them saw the mines and jerked a servo arm toward them. Some mechs sitting near the front began sending warning wails and the track car slammed on its brakes and slewed across the road. It stopped at the lip of the ditch and made a heavy grinding noise and began backing up.

Three mechs jumped off its front. Bradley brought his sights down onto one of them and the air splintered with a huge rolling blast that made him flinch and forget about everything else.

The gun-metal hood of the transport seemed to dissolve into a blue cloud. The tailgate of the tracker flew backward with a sharp *whap*.

The air became a fine array of tumbling dots as debris spewed up like a dark fountain and then showered down all across the hillside. Thunks and whacks told of big mech parts hitting nearby. Bradley tucked his head into the grass. He yelped as something nicked his knee and something else tumbled over him and was gone. Pebbles thumped his back.

When Bradley looked up he expected to see nothing but small scraps left on the road. His ears roared with the memory of the sound and he wondered if he would be deaf. But through the smoke he saw several mechs lurching away from the disemboweled transport. There were five of them bunched closely together.

He brought his rifle up and shot very swiftly at the lead mech. It went down and he shot the next object and the next, seeing only the moving forms and the swirling blur of action.

Angel was firing and Nelson too, sharp bangs so regular and fast Bradley thought of the clack of a stick held by a boy as he ran by a picket fence—and in a few seconds there were no more mechs standing on the road.

But there were two in the ditch. Gray smoke billowed everywhere.

Bradley saw a mech moving just as a quick rod of light leaped from it, cutting through the smoke. He heard Angel yelp and swear. She held up her hand and it was bloody.

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Another instantaneous rod of light stood for a second in the air and missed her and then a third struck her weapon. It flew to pieces with a loud bang. Bradley aimed at the mech and kept firing until he saw it and the second one sprawl across the ditch and stop moving.

A compressed silence returned to the valley. The transport was burning but beyond its snaps and pops he could see nothing moving on the road.

Angel was moaning with her wound and Nelson took care of her, pulling out a first aid kit as he ran over. When they saw that she was going to be all right Dexter and Bradley walked slowly down to the road. Dexter said, "Bet that's the last big party. We'll get strays now, no problems."

Bradley's legs felt like logs thudding into the earth as he walked. He waved to Paul who was already on the road but he did not feel like talking to anybody. The air was crisp and layered with so many scents, he felt them sliding in and out of his lungs like separate flavors in an ice cream sundae.

"Hey!" Mercer called from the transport cab. "They got food in here!"

Everyone riveted attention on the cab. Mercer pitched out cartons of dry food, some cans, a case of soft drinks.

"Somethin', huh?—mechs carryin' food," Angel said wonderingly. For several minutes they ate and drank and then Paul called, "There's a boy here."

They found Paul standing over a boy who was half concealed by a fallen mech. Bradley saw that the group of mechs had been shielding this boy when they were cut down. "Still alive," Paul said, "barely."

"The food was for him," Mercer said.

Bradley bent down. Paul cradled the boy but it was clear from the drawn, white face and masses of blood down the front, some fresh red and most brown, drying, that there was not much hope. They had no way to get him to cryopreservation. Thin lips opened, trembled, and the boy said, "Bad . . . mommy . . . hurt . . ."

Dexter said, "This ID says he's under mech care."

"How come?" Angel asked.

"Says he's mentally deficient. These're medical care mechs." Dexter pushed one of the mech carcasses and it rolled, showing H-caste insignia.

"Damn, how'd they get mixed in with these reb mechs?" Nelson asked irritably, the way people do when they are looking for something or someone to blame.

"Accident," Dexter said simply. "Confusion. Prob'ly thought they were doing the best thing, getting their charge away from the fighting."

"Damn," Nelson said again. Then his lips moved but nothing came out.

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Bradley knelt down and brushed some flies away from the boy's face. He gave the boy some water but the eyes were far away and the lips just spit the water out. Angel was trying to find the wound and stop the bleeding but she had a drawn, waxy look.

"Damn war," Nelson said. "Mechs, they're to blame for this."

Bradley took a self-heating cup of broth from Paul and gave a little to the boy. The face was no more than fifteen and the eyes gazed abstractedly up into a cloudless sky. Bradley watched a butterfly land on the boy's arm. It fluttered its wings in the slanting yellow-gold sunlight and tasted the drying brown blood. Bradley wondered distantly if butterflies ate blood. Then the boy choked and the butterfly flapped away on a breeze and when Bradley looked back the boy was dead.

They stood for a long moment around the body. The road was a chaos of ripped mech carapaces and tangled innards and the wreck of the exploded transport. Nobody was going to run into an ambush here any more today and nobody made a move to clear the road.

"Y'know, these med-care mechs, they're pretty smart," Paul said. "They just made the wrong decision."

"Smarter than the boy, probably," Bradley said. The boy was not much younger than Bradley but in the eyes there had been just an emptiness. "He was human, though."

The grand opening elation he had felt all morning slowly began to seep out of Bradley. "Hell of a note, huh?" he said to no one in particular. Others were doing that, just saying things to the breeze as they slowly dispersed and started to make order out of the shambles.

The snap and sparkle of the air were still with him, though. He had never felt so alive in his life. Suddenly he saw the soft, encased, abstract world he had inhabited since birth as an enclave, a preserve—a trap. The whole of human society had been in a cocoon, a velvet wrapping tended by mechs.

They had found an alternative to war: wealth. And simple human kindness. *Human* kindness.

Maybe that was all gone, now.

And it was no tragedy, either. Not if it gave them back the world as it could be, a life of tangs and zests and the gritty rub of real things. He had dwelled in the crystal spaces of the mind while beneath such cool antiseptic entertainments his body yearned for the hot raw earth and its moist mysteries.

Nelson and Mercer were collecting mech insignia. "Want an AB? We found one over here. Musta got caught up and brought along by these worker mechs." Nelson asked Bradley.

"I'll just take down the serial numbers," Bradley said automatically,

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not wanting to talk to Nelson more than necessary. Or to anyone. There had been so much talk.

He spent time getting the numbers logged into his comm and then with shoving mech carcasses off the road.

Dexter came over to him and said, "Sure you don't want one of these?" It was a laser one of the reb mechs had used. Black, ribbed, with a glossy sheen. "Angel's keeping one. She'll be telling the story of her wound and showing the laser that maybe did it, prob'ly for the rest of her life."

Bradley looked at the sleek, sensuous thing. It gleamed in the raw sunlight like a promise. "No."

"Sure?"

"Take the damned stuff away."

Dexter looked at him funny and walked off. Bradley stared at the mechs he was shoving off the road and tried to think how they were different from the boy, who probably was indeed less intelligent than they were, but it was all clouded over with the memory of how much he liked the rifle and the sweet grass and shooting at the targets when they came up to the crossfire point in the bright sun. It was hard to think at all as the day got its full heat and after a while he did not try. It was easier that way.●

ANGELS ON THE MOON

How peaceful, lying here with you
Alone, locked in our separate suits,
Staring into heaven while
The Earth turns slowly overhead.
We move, we touch gloved hands,
And make angels in the dust
That time laid thick upon the stone.

—Camille Bacon-Smith

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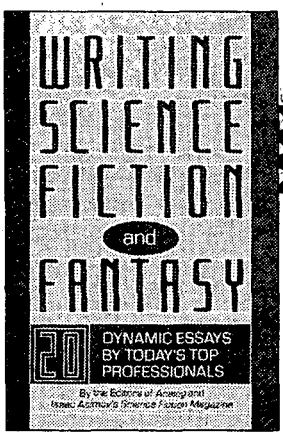

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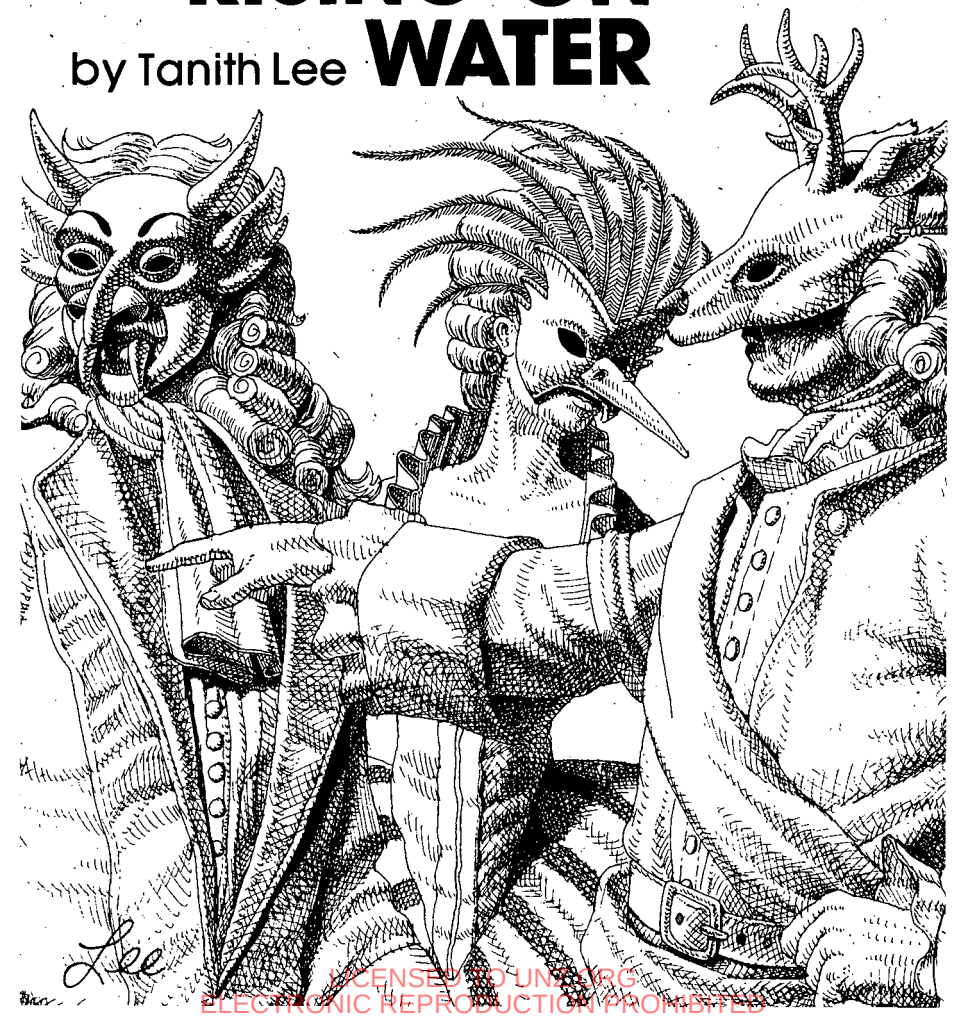
A paperback edition of Tanith Lee's *The Blood of Roses* has just been released by Century Hutchinson in England, and in December, *The Book of the Dead* will be published in the United States by Overlook Press. Her other recent American publications include *A Heroine of the World* (DAW, 1989). Ms. Lee's last story for *IAsfm* was "Zelle's Thursday" (October 1989). Her newest tale is the haunting and frightening story of...

VENUS RISING ON WATER

by Tanith Lee



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Like long hair, the weeds grew down the façades of the city, over ornate shutters and leaden doors, into the pale green silk of the lagoon. Ten hundred ancient mansions crumbled. Sometimes a flight of birds was exhaled from their crowded mass, or a thread of smoke was drawn up into the sky. Day long a mist bloomed on the water, out of which distant towers rose like snakes of deadly gold. Once in every month a boat passed, carving the lagoon that had seemed thickened beyond movement. Far less often, here and there, a shutter cracked open and the weed hair broke, a stream of plaster fell like a blue ray. Then, some faint face peered out, probably eclipsed by a mask. It was a place of veils. Visitors were occasional. They examined the decaying mosaics, loitered in the caves of arches, hunted phantoms through marble tunnels. And under the streets they took photographs: One bald flash scouring a century off the catacombs and sewers, the lacework coffins, the handful of albino rats perched up on them, caught in a second like ghosts of white hearts, mute, with waiting eyes.

The dawn star shone in the lagoon on a tail of jagged silver. The sun rose. There was an unsuitable noise—the boat was coming.

"There," said the girl on the deck of the boat, "stop there, please."

The boat sidled to a pavement and stood on the water, trembling and murmuring. The girl left it with a clumsy gracefulness, and poised at the edge of the city with her single bag, cheerful and undaunted before the lonely cliffs of masonry, and all time's indifference.

She was small, about twenty-five, with ornately short fair hair, clad in old-fashioned jeans and a shirt. Her skin was fresh, her eyes bright with intelligent foolishness. She looked about, and upward. Her interest clearly centered on a particular house, which overhung the water like a face above a mirror, its eyes closed.

Presently the boat pulled away and went off across the lagoon, and only the girl and the silence remained.

She picked up her bag and walked along the pavement to an archway with a shut, leaden door. Here she knocked boldly, as if too stupid to understand the new silence must not yet be tampered with.

Her knocking sent hard blobs of sound careering round the vault of greenish crystal space that was the city's morning. They seemed to strike peeling walls and stone pilasters five miles off. From the house itself came no response, not even the vague sense of something stirring like a serpent in sleep.

"Now this is too bad," said the girl to the silence, upbraiding it mildly. "They *told* me a caretaker would be here, in time for the boat."

She left her bag (subconscious acknowledgment of the emptiness and indifference), by the gate, and walked along under the leaning face of the house. From here she saw the floors of the balconies of flowered iron;

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she listened for a sudden snap of shutters. But only the water lapped under the pavement, component of silence. This house was called The Palace of the Planet. The girl knew all about it, and what she did not know she had come here to discover. She was writing a long essay that was necessary to her career of scholastic journalism. She was not afraid.

In the façade of The Palace of the Planet was another door, plated with green bronze. The weed had not choked it, and over its top leaned a marble woman with bare breasts and a dove in her hands. The girl reached out and rapped with a bronze knocker shaped like a fist. The house gave off a sound that after all succeeded in astonishing her. It must be a hollow shell, unfurnished, half its walls fallen—

These old cities were museums now, kept for their history, made available on request to anyone—not many—who wished to view. They had their dwellers also, but in scarcity. Destitutes and eccentrics lived in them, monitored by the state. The girl, whose name was Jonquil Hare, had seen the register of this place. In all, there were one hundred and seventy-four names, some queried, where once had teemed thousands, crushing each other in the ambition to survive.

The hollow howling of her knock faded in the house. Jonquil said, "I'm coming in. I *am.*" And marched back to her bag beneath the leaden gate. She surveyed the gate, and the knotted weed which had come down on it. Jonquil Hare tried the weed. It resisted her strongly. She took up her bag, in which there was nothing breakable, seasoned traveler as she was, and flung it over the arch. She took the weed in her small strong hands and hauled herself up in her clumsy, graceful way, up to the arch, and sat there, looking in at a morning-twilight garden of shrubs that had not been pruned in a hundred years, and trees that became each other. A blue fountain shone dimly. Jonquil smiled upon it, and swung herself over in the weed and slithered down, into the environ of the house.

By midday, Jonquil had gone busily over most of The Palace of the Planet. Its geography was fixed in her head, but only partly, for she liked the effect of a puzzle of rooms and corridors. Within the lower portion of the house a large hall gave on a large enclosed inner courtyard, that in turn led to the garden. Above, chambers of the first story would have opened on the court, but their doors were sealed by the blue-green weed, which had smothered the court itself and so turned it into a strange undersea grotto where columns protruded like yellow coral. Above the lower floor, two long staircases drew up into apparently uncountable annexes and cells, and to a great salon with tarnished mirrors, also broken like spiderweb. The salon had tall windows that stared through their blind shutters at the lagoon.

There were carvings everywhere; lacking light, she did not study them

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now. And, as suspected, there was very little furniture—a pair of desks with hollow drawers, spindly chairs, a divan in rotted ivory silk. In one oblong room was a bed-frame with vast tapering pillars like idle rockets. Cobwebby draperies shimmered from the canopy in a draft, while patches of bled emerald sunlight hovered on the floor.

Jonquil succeeded in opening a shutter in the salon. A block of afternoon fell in. Next door, in the adjacent chamber, she set up her inflatable mattress, her battery lamp and heater, some candles she had brought illegally in a padded tube. Sitting on her unrolled mat in the subaqueous light of a shuttered window which refused to give, she ate from her pack of food snacks and drank cola. Then she arranged some books and notepads, pens and pencils, a magnifier, camera and unit, and a miniature recorder on the unfolded table.

She spoke to the room, as from the start she had spoken consecutively to the house. "Well, here we are."

But she was restless. The caretaker must be due to arrive, and until this necessary procedure had taken place, interruption hung over her. Of course, the caretaker would enable Jonquil to gain possession of the house secrets, the holostetic displays of furnishings and earlier life that might have been indigenous here, the hidden walks and rooms that undoubtedly lay inside the walls.

Jonquil was tired. She had risen at three A.M. for the boat after an evening of hospitable farewells. She lay down on her inflatable bed with the pillow under her neck. Through half-closed eyes she saw the room breathing with pastel motes of sun, and heard the rustle of weed at the shutter.

She dreamed of climbing a staircase which, dreaming, seemed new to her. At the foot of the stair a marble pillar supported a globe of some aquamarine material, covered by small configurations of alien landmasses, isolate in seas. The globe was a whimsical and inaccurate eighteenth-century rendition of the planet Venus, to which the house was mysteriously affiliated. As she climbed the stairs, random sprinklings of light came and went. Jonquil sensed that someone was ascending with her, step for step, not on the actual stair, but inside the peeling wall at her left side. Near the top of the stair (which was lost in darkness), an arched window had been let into the wall, milky and unclear and further obscured by some drops of waxen stained glass. As she came level with the window, Jonquil glanced sidelong at it. A shadowy figure appeared, on the far side of the pane, perhaps a woman, but hardly to be seen.

Jonquil started awake at the sound of the caretaker's serviceable shoes clumping into the house.

The caretaker was a woman. She did not offer her name, and no explanation for her late arrival. She had brought the house manual, and

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advised Jonquil on how to operate the triggers in its panel—visions flickered annoyingly over the rooms and were gone. A large box contained facsimiles of things pertaining to the house and its history. Jonquil had seen most of these already.

"There are the upper rooms, the attics. Here's the master key."

The woman showed Jonquil a hidden stair that probed these upper reaches of the house. It was not the stairway from the dream, but narrow and winding as the steps of a bell-tower. There were no other concealed chambers.

"If there's anything else you find you require, you must go out to the booth in the square. Here is the code to give the machine."

The caretaker was middle-aged, stout, and uncharming. She seemed not to know the house at all, only everything about it, and glanced around her disapprovingly. Doubtless she lived in one of the contemporary golden towers across the lagoon, which, in the lingering powder of mist, passed for something older and more strange that they were not.

"Who came here last?" asked Jonquil. "Did anyone?"

"There was a visitor in the spring of the last Centenary Year. He stayed only one day, to study the plaster, I believe."

Jonquil smiled, pleased and smug that the house was virtually all her own, for the city's last centenary had been twenty years ago, nearly her lifetime.

She was glad when the caretaker left, and the silence of the house did not occur to Jonquil as she went murmuring from room to room, able now to operate the shutters, bring in light and examine the carvings in corners, on cornices. Most of them showed earlier defacement, as expected. She switched on, too, scenes from the manual, of costumed, dining, and conversing figures amid huge pieces of furniture and swags of brocade. No idea of ghosts was suggested by these holostets. Jonquil reserved a candelit masked ball for a later more fitting hour.

The greenish amber of afternoon slid into the plate of water. A chemical rose flooded the sky, like color processing for a photograph. Venus, the evening star, was visible beyond the garden.

Jonquil climbed up the bell-tower steps to the attics.

The key turned easily in an upper door. But the attics disappointed. They were high and dark—her flashlight penetrated like a sword—webbed with the woven dust, and thick with damp, and a sour cloacal smell. Otherwise, there was an almost emptiness. From beams hung unidentified shreds. On one wall a tapestry on a frame, indecipherable, presumably not thought good enough for renovation. Jonquil moved reluctantly through the obscured space, telling it it was in poor taste, commiserating with it, until she came against a chest of cold black wood.

"Now what are you?" Jonquil inquired of the chest.

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It was long and low, its lid carved over with a design which had begun to crumble. . . . Curious fruits in a wreath.

The shape of the chest reminded her of something. She peered at the fruits. Were they elongate lemons, pomegranates? Perhaps they were meant to be Venusian fruits. The astrologer Johanus, who had lived in The Palace of the Planet, had played over the house his obsession and ignorance with, and of, Venus. He had claimed in his treatise closely to have studied the surface of the planet through his own telescope. There was an atmosphere of clouds, parting slowly, beneath, an underlake landscape, cratered and mountained, upon limitless waters. "The mirror of Venus is her sea," Johanus wrote. And he had painted her, but his daubs were lost, like most of his writing, reputedly burnt. He had haunted the house alive, an old wild man, watching for star-rise, muttering. He had died in the charity hospital, penniless and mad. His servants had destroyed his work, frightened of it, and vandalized the decorations of the house.

Jonquil tried to raise the lid of the chest. It would not come up.

"Are you locked?"

But there was no lock. The lid was stuck or merely awkward.

"I shall come back," said Jonquil.

She had herself concocted an essay on the astrologer, but rather as a good little girl writes once a year to her senile grandfather. She appreciated his involvement—that, but for him, none of this would be—but he did not interest her. It was the house which did that. There was a switch on the manual that would conjure acted reconstructions of the astrologer's life, even to the final days, and to the rampage of the vandals. But Jonquil did not bother with this record. It was to her as if the house had adorned itself, using the man only as an instrument. His paintings and notes were subsidiary, and she had not troubled much over their disappearance.

"Yes, I'll be back with a wrench, and you'd just better have something in there worth looking at," said Jonquil to the chest. Doubtless it was vacant.

Night on the lagoon, in the city. The towers in the distance offered no lights, being constructed to conceal them. In two far-off spots, a pale glow crept from a window to the water. The silence of night was not like the silence of day.

Jonquil sang as the travel-cook prepared her steak, and, drinking a glass of reconstituted wine, going out into the salon, she switched on the masked ball.

At once the room was over two hundred years younger. It was drenched in gilt, and candles stood like flowers of golden diamond on their stems

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of wax, while the ceiling revealed dolphins and doves who escorted a goddess over a sea in a ship that was a shell. The windows were open to a revised night hung with diamanté lamps, to a lagoon of black ink where bright boats were passing to the sound of mandolins. The salon purred and thrummed with voices. It was impossible to decipher a word, yet laughter broke through, and clear notes of the music. No one danced as yet. Perhaps they never would, for they were creatures from another world indeed, every one clad in gold and silver, ebony and glacial white, with jewels on them like water-drops tossed up by a wave. They had no faces. Their heads were those of plumed herons and horned deer, black velvet cats and lions of the sun and moon lynxes, angels, demons, merthings from out of the lagoon, and scarabs from the hollows of time. They moved and promenaded, paused with teardrops of glass holding bloodlike wine, fluttered their fans of peacocks and palm leaves.

Jonquil stayed at the edge of the salon. She could have walked straight through them, through their holostetic actors' bodies and their prop garments of silk, steel and chrysoprase, but she preferred to stay in the doorway, drinking her own wine, adapting her little song to the tune of the mandolins.

After the astrologer had gone, others had come, and passed, in the house. The rich lady, and the prince, with their masks and balls, suppers and recitals.

The travel-cook chimed, and Jonquil switched off two hundred elegantly-acting persons, a thousand faked gems and lights, and went to eat her steak.

She wrote with her free hand: *Much too pretty. Tomorrow I must photograph the proper carvings.* And said this over aloud.

Jonquil dreamed she was in the attic. There was a vague light, perhaps the moon coming in at cracks in the shutters, or the dying walls. Below, a noise went on, the holostetic masked ball which she had forgotten to switch off. Jonquil looked at the chest of black wood. She had realized she did not have to open it herself. Downstairs, in the salon, an ormolu clock struck midnight, the hour of unmasking. There was a little click. In the revealing darkness, the lid of the chest began to lift. Jonquil knew what it had reminded her of. A shadow sat upright in the coffin of the chest. It had a slender but indefinite form, and yet it turned its head and Jonquil saw the two eyes looking at her, only the eyeballs, gleaming, in two crescents, on the dark.

The lid fell over with a crash.

Jonquil woke up sitting on her inflatable bed, with her hands at her throat, her eyes raised toward the ceiling.

"A dream," announced Jonquil.

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She turned on her battery lamp, and the small room appeared. There was no sound in the house. Beyond the closed door the salon rested. "Silly," said Jonquil.

She lay and read a book having nothing to do with The Palace of the Planet, until she fell asleep with the light on.

The square was a terrifying ruin. Hidden by the frontage of the city, it was nearly inconceivable. Upper stories had collapsed onto the paving, only the skeletons of architecture remained, with occasionally a statue, some of them shining green and vegetable (the dissolution of gold), piercing through. The paving was broken up, marked by the slough of birds. Here the booth arose, unable to decay.

"There's a chest in the attics. It won't open," Jonquil accused the receiver. "The manual lists it. It says, One sable-wood jester chest."

The reply came. "This is why you are unable to open it. A jester chest was just that, a deceiving or joke object, often solid. There is nothing inside it."

"No," said Jonquil, "some jester chests do open. And this isn't solid."

"I am afraid you are wrong. The chest has been investigated, and contains nothing, neither is there any means to open it."

"An X-ray doesn't always show—" began Jonquil. But the machine had disconnected. "I won't have this," said Jonquil.

Three birds blew over the square. Beneath in the sewers, the colony of voiceless rats, white as moonlight, ran noiselessly under her feet. But she would not shudder. Jonquil strutted back to the house through alleys of black rot where windows were suspended like lingering cards of ice. Smashed glass lay underfoot. The awful smell of the sea was in the alleys, for the sea came in and in. It had drowned the city in psychic reality, and already lay far over the heads of all the buildings, calm, oily and still, reflecting the sun and the stars.

Jonquil got into the house by the gate-door the manual had made accessible, crossing the garden where the blue fountain was a girl crowned with myrtle. Jonquil went straight up over the floors to the attic stair, and climbed that. The attic door was ajar, as she believed she had left it. "Here I am," said Jonquil. The morning light was much stronger in the attics and she did not need her flashlight. She found the chest and bent over it.

"You've got a secret. Maybe you're only warped shut, that would be the damp up here. . . . There may be a lining that could baffle the X-ray."

She tried the wrench, specifically designed not to inflict any injury. But it slipped and slithered and did no good. Jonquil knelt down and began to feel all over the chest, searching for some spring or other mech-

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anism. She was caressing the chest, going so cautiously and delicately over it. Its likeness to a coffin was very evident, but bones would have been seen. "Giving me dreams," she said. Something moved against her finger. It was very slight. It was as if the chest had wriggled under her tickling and testing like a sleeping child. Jonquil put back her hand—she had flinched, and reprimanded herself. At her touch the movement came again. She heard the clarity of the *click* she had heard before in the dream. And before she could stop herself, she jumped up, and stepped backward, one, two, three, until the wall stopped her.

The lid of the chest was coming up, gliding over, and slipping down without any noise but a mild slap. Nothing sat up in the chest. But Jonquil saw the edge of something lying there in it, in the shadow of it.

"Yes it is," she said, and went forward. She leant on the chest, familiarly now. Everything was explained, even the psychokinetic activity of the dream. "A painting."

Jonquil Hare leaned on the chest and stared in. Presently she took hold of the elaborate and gilded frame, and got the picture angled upward a short way, so it too leaned on the chest.

The painting was probably three centuries old. She could tell that from the pigments and disposition of the oils, but not from the artist. The artist was unknown. In size it was an upright oblong, about one and a half meters by one meter in width.

The work was a full-length portrait, rather well executed and proportioned, lacking only any vestige of life, or animation. It might have been the masterly likeness of a handsome doll—this was how the artist had given away his amateur status.

She looked like a woman of about Jonquil's age, which given the period meant of course she would have been far younger, eighteen or nineteen years. Her skin was pale, and had a curious tint, as did in fact the entire scene, perhaps due to some corrosion of the paint—but even so it had not gone to the usual brown and mud tones, but rather to a sort of yellowish blue. Therefore the color scheme of clothing and hair might be misleading, for the long loose tresses were yellowish blonde, and the dress bluish grey. Like the hair, the dress was loose, a robe of a kind. And yet, naturally, both hair and robe were draped in a particular manner that dated them, as surely as if their owner had been gowned or coiffured at the apex of that day's fashion. She was slender but looked strong. There was no plumpness to her chin and throat, her hands were narrow. An unusually masculine woman, more suitable to Jonquil's century, where the sexes often blended, slim and lightly muscular—the woman in the painting was also like this. Her face was impervious, its eyes black. She was not beautiful or alluring. It was a flat animal face, tempered like

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the moon by its own chill light, and lacking sight or true expression because the artist had not understood how to intercept them.

Behind the woman was a vista that Jonquil took at first for the lagoon. But then she saw that between the fog-bank of blued-yellow cloud and the bluish-greenish water, a range of pocked and fissured mountains lurched like an unearthly aqueduct. It was the landscape of Johanus's Venus. The artist of the picture was the mad astrologer who had invested the house.

How could it be that the authorities had missed this find?

"My," said Jonquil to the painting. She was excited. What would this not be worth in tokens of fame?

She pulled on the painting again, more carefully than before. It was light for its size. She could manage it. She paused a moment, close to the woman on the canvas. The canvas was strange, the texture of it under the paint—but in those days three centuries before, they had sometimes used odd materials. Even some chemical or experimental potion could have been mixed with the paint, to give it now its uncanny tinge.

A name was written in a scroll at the bottom of the picture. Jonquil took it for a signature. But it was not the astrologer's name, though near enough it indicated some link. *Johnina.*

"Jo-*nine*-ah," said Jonquil, "we are going for a short walk, down to where I can take a proper look at you."

With enormous care now, she drew the picture of Johnina out of the attics, and down the narrow stair toward the salon.

Jonquil was at the masked ball. In her hand was a fan of long white feathers caught in a claw of zircons, her costume was of white satin streaked with silver veins, and her face was masked like a white furred cat. She knew her hair was too short for the day and age, and this worried her by its inappropriateness. No one spoke to her, but all around to each other they chattered (incomprehensibly), and their curled powdered hair poured out of their masks like milk boiling over. Jonquil observed everything acutely, the man daintily taking snuff (an addict), the woman in the dress striped black-and-ivory peering through her ruby eye-glass. Out on the lagoon, the gleaming boats went by, trailing red roses in the water.

Jonquil was aware that no one took any notice of her, had anything to do with her, and she was peevish, because they must have invited her. Who was she supposed to be? A duke's daughter, or his mistress? Should she not be married at her age, and have borne children? She would have to pretend.

There was a man with rings on every finger, and beyond him a checkered mandolin player, and beyond him, a woman stood in a grey gown

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different from the rest. Her mask covered all her face; it was the countenance of a globe, perhaps the moon, in silver, and about it hair like pale tarnished fleece, too long as Jonquil's as too short, was falling to her pelvis over the bodice of the gown.

A group of actors—yes, they were only acting, it was not real—intervened. The woman was hidden for a moment, and when the group had passed, she was gone.

She was an actress, too, which was why Jonquil had thought something about her recognizable.

Jonquil became annoyed that she should be here, among actors, for acting was nothing to do with her. She turned briskly, and went toward the door of the chamber which led off from the salon. Inside, the area was dark, yet everything there was visible, and Jonquil was surprised to see a huge bed-frame from another room dominating the space. Surely Jonquil's professional impedimenta had been put here, and the inflatable sleeping couch she traveled with? As for this bed, she had seen it elsewhere, and it had been naked then, but now it was dressed. Silk curtains hung from the pillars, and a mattress, pillows, sheets, and embroidered coverlet were on it. Rather than the pristine appearance of a model furnishing, the bed had a slightly rumpled, tumbled look, as if Jonquil had indeed used it. Jonquil closed the door of the room firmly on the ball outside, and all sound of it at once ceased.

To her relief, she found that she was actually undressed and in the thin shirt that was her night garment. She went to the bed, resigned, and got into it. She lay back on the pillows. The bed was wonderfully comfortable, lushly undisciplined.

Johanus's house was so silent—noiseless. Jonquil lay and listened to the total absence of sound, which was like a pressure, as if she had floated down beneath the sea. Her bones were coral, and pearls her eyes. . . . Fish might swim in through the slats of a shutter, across the water of the air. But before that happened, the door would open again.

The door opened.

The doorway was lit with moonlight, and the salon beyond it, for the masked ball had gone. Only the woman with the silver planet face remained, and she came over the threshold. Behind her, in lunar twilight, Jonquil saw the lagoon lying across the salon, and the walls had evaporated, leaving a misty shore, and mountains that were tunneled through. The bed itself was adrift on water, and bobbed gently, but Johnina crossed without difficulty.

Her silver mask was incised, like the carvings in the house corners, the globes that were the planet Venus. The mask reflected in the water. Two silver discs, separated, drawing nearer.

Jonquil said sternly, "I must wake up."

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And she dived upward from the bed, and tore through layers of cloud or water and came out into the actual room, rolling on the inflatable couch.

"I'm not frightened," stated Jonquil. "Why should I be?"

She turned on her battery lamp and angled the light to fall across the painting of Johnina, which she had leant against the wall.

"What are you trying to tell me now? In the morning I'm going to call them about you. Don't you want to be famous?"

The painting had no resonance. It looked poorly in the harsh glare of the lamp, a stilted figure and crackpot scenery, the brushwork disordered. The canvas was so smooth.

"Go to sleep," said Jonquil to Johnina, and shut off the light as if to be sensible with a tiresome child.

In the true dark, which had no moon, the silence of the house crept closer. Dispassionately, Jonquil visualized old Johanus padding about the floors in his broken soft shoes. He thought he had seen the surface of the planet Venus. He had painted the planet as an allegory that was a woman, just like the puns of Venus the *goddess* in marble over the door, and on the ceiling of the salon.

Jonquil began to sense Johanus in his study, among the alchemical muddle, the primeval alchemical chaos from which all perfect creation evolved. But she regarded him off-handedly, the dust and grime and spillages, the blackened skulls and alembics growing moss.

Johanus wrote on parchment with a goose quill.

He wrote in Latin also, and although she had learnt Latin in order to pursue her study, this was too idiosyncratic, too much of its era, for her to follow. Then the words began to sound, and she grasped them. Bored, Jonquil attended. She did not recall switching on this holostet, could not think why she had decided to play it.

"So, on the forty-third night, after an hour of watching, the cloud parted, and there was before me the face of the planet. I saw great seas, or one greater sea, with small masses of land, pitted like debased silver. And the mountains I saw. And all this in a yellow glow from the cloud. . . ."

Jonquil wondered why she did not stop the holostet. She was not interested in this. But she could not remember where the manual was.

"For seven nights I applied myself to my telescope, and on each night, the clouds of the planet sensuously parted, allowing me a view of her bareness."

Jonquil thought she would have to leave the bed in order to switch off the manual. But the bed, with its tall draped posts, was warm and comfortable.

"On the eighth night it came to me. Even as I watched, I was watched

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in my turn. Some creature was there, some unseen intelligence, which, sensing my appraisal, reached out to seize me. I do not know how such a thing is possible. Where I see only a miniature of that world, it sees me exactly, where and what I am, every atom. At once I removed myself, left my perusal, and shut up the instrument. But I believe I was too late. Somehow it has come to me, here, in the world of men. It is with me, although I cannot hear it or behold it. It is the invisible air, it is the silence of the night. What shall I do?"

The holostet of Johânus was no longer operating. Jonquil lay in the four-poster bed in the room that led from the salon. The door was shut. Someone was in the room with her, beside the bed. Jonquil turned her head on the pillow, without hurry, to see..

A hand was stroking back her short hair, it was very pleasant; she was a cat that was being caressed. Jonquil smiled lazily. It was like the first day of the holidays, and her mother was standing by her bed, and they would talk. But no, not her mother. It was the wonderful-looking woman she had seen—where was that, now? Perhaps in the city, an eccentric who lived there, out walking in the turquoise of dusk or funeral orchid of dawning, when the star was on the lagoon. Very tall, a developed, lithe body, graceful, with the blue wrap tied loosely, and the amazing hair, so thick and blonde, falling over it, over her shoulders and the firm cupped line of the breasts, the flat belly, and into the mermaid V of the thighs.

"Hello," said Jonquil. And the woman gave the faintest shake of her lion's head in its mane. Jonquil was not to speak. They did not need words. But the woman smiled, too. It was such a sensational smile. So effortless, stimulating, and calming. The dark, dark eyes rested on Jonquil with a tenderness that was also cruel. Jonquil had seen this look in the eyes of others, and a frisson of eagerness went over her, and she was ashamed, it was too soon to expect—but the woman was leaning over her now, the marvel of face blurred and the mane of hair trickling over Jonquil's skin. The mouth kissed, gently and unhesitatingly. "Oh, yes," said Jonquil, without any words.

The woman, who was called Johnina, was lying on her. She was heavy, her weight crushed and pinned, and Jonquil was helpless. It was the most desired thing, to be helpless like this, unable even to lift her own hands, as if she had no strength at all. And Johnina's hands were on her breasts somehow, between their two adhering bodies, finding out Jonquil's shape with slow smooth spiralings. And softly, without anything crude or urgent, the sea-blue thigh of Johnina rubbed against Jonquil until she ached and melted. She shut her eyes and could think only of the sweet unhurried journey of her body, of the hands that guided and

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stroked, and the mermaid tail that bore her up, and the sound of the sea in her ears. Johnina kissed and kissed, and Jonquil Hare felt herself dissolving into Johnina, into her body, and she could not even cry out. And then Jonquil was spread-eagled out into a tidal orgasm, where with every wave some further part of her was washed away. And when there was nothing left, she woke up in the pitch black void of the silence, with something hard and cold, clammy, but nearly weightless, lying on her, an oblong in a gilded frame, the painting which had dropped over on top of her and covered her from breast to ankle.

She flung it off and it clattered down. She clutched at her body, thinking to discover herself clotted with a sort of glue or slime, but there was nothing like that.

She was weak and dizzy and her heart drummed noisily, so she could not hear the silence any more.

"Let me speak to the house caretaker," snapped Jonquil at the obtuse machine. Outside the booth, the ruin of the great square seemed to sway on the wind, which was violent, ruffling the lagoon in flounces, whirling small scraps of colored substances that might have been paper, rags, or skin.

"The caretaker is not available. However, your request has been noted."

"But this picture is an important find—and I want it removed, *today*, to a place of safety."

The machine had disconnected.

Jonquil stood in the booth, as if inside a spacesuit, and watched the alien atmosphere of the city swirling with bits and colors.

"Don't be a fool," said Jonquil. She left the booth and cowered before the wind, which was not like any breeze felt in civilized places. "It's an old painting. A *bad* old painting. So, you're lonely, you had a dream. Get back to work."

Jonquil worked. She photographed all the carvings she had decided were relevant or unusually bizarre—Venus the goddess riding the crescent moon, a serpent coiled about a planet that maybe was simply an orb. She put these into the developer and later drew them out and arranged them in her room beside the salon. (She had already moved the painting of Johnina into the salon—she felt tired, and it seemed heavier than before—left it with its face to the wall, propped under the mirrors. It was now about twenty-five meters from her inflatable bed, and well outside the door.)

She went over the house again, measuring and recording comments. She opened shutters and regarded the once hivelike cliffs of the city, and

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the waters on the other side. The wind settled and a mist condensed. By midafternoon the towers of modernity were quite gone.

"The light always has a green tinge—blue and yellow mixed. When the sky pinkens at dawn or sunset the water is bottle-green, an apothecary's bottle." "And purple for the prose," Jonquil added.

In two hours it would be dusk, and then night.

This was ridiculous. She had to face up to herself, that she was nervous and apprehensive. But there was nothing to be afraid of, or even to look forward to.

She still felt depressed, exhausted, so she took some more vitamins. Something she had eaten, probably, before leaving for the city, had caught up with her. And that might even account for the dream. The dreams.

She did not go up into the attics. She spent some time out of doors, in the grotto of the courtyard, and in the garden, which the manual showed her with paved paths and carven box hedges, orange trees, and the fountain playing. She did not watch this holostet long. Her imagination was working too, and too hard, and she might start to see Johnina in a blue-grey gown going about between the trees.

What, anyway, *was* Johnina? Doubtless Jonquil's unconscious had based the Johanus part of the dream on scraps of the astrologer's writings she had seen, and that she had consciously forgotten. Johanus presumably believed some alien intelligence from the planet he observed had made use of the channel of his awareness. For him it was female (interesting women then were always witches, demons, he would be bound to think in that way), and when she suborned him, in his old man's obsession, he painted her approximately to a woman—just as he had approximated his vision of the planet to something identifiable, the pastorale of a cool Hell. And he gave his demoness a name birthed out of his own, a strange daughter.

Jonquil did not recollect, try as she would, reading anything so curious about Johanus, but she must have done.

He then concealed the painting of his malign inamorata in the trick chest, to protect it from the destructive fears of the servants.

Only another hour, and the sky would infuse like pale tea and rose petals. The sun would go, the star would visit the garden. Darkness.

"You're not as tough as you thought," said Jonquil. She disapproved of herself. "All right. We'll sit this one out. Stay awake tonight. And tomorrow I'll get hold of that damn caretaker lady if I have to swim there."

As soon as it was sunset, Jonquil went back to her chosen room. She had to pass through the salon, and had an urge to go up to the picture, turn it round, and scrutinize it. But that was stupid. She had seen all

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there was to see. She shut her inner door on the salon with a bang. Now she was separate from all the house.

She lit her lamp, and, pulling out her candles, lit those too. She primed the travel-cook for a special meal, chicken with a lemon sauce, creamed potatoes, and as the wing of night unfolded over the lagoon she closed the shutter and switched on a music tape. She sat drinking wine and writing up that day's notes on the house. After all, she had done almost all that was needed. Might she not see if she could leave tomorrow? To hire transport before the month was up and the regular boat arrived would be expensive, but then, she could get to work the quicker perhaps, away from the house. . . . She had meant to explore the city, of course, but it was in fact less romantic than dejecting, and potentially dangerous. She might run into one of the insane inhabitants, and then what?

Jonquil thought, acutely visualizing the nocturnal mass of the city. No one was alive in it, surely. The few lights, the occasional smokes and whispers, were inaugurated by machines, to deceive. There were the birds, and their subterranean counterpart, the rats. Only she alone, Jonquil Hare, was here this night between masonry and water. She alone, and one another.

"*Don't* be silly," said Jonquil.

How loud her voice sounded, now the music had come to an end. The silence was gigantic, a fifth dimension.

It seemed wrong to put on another tape. The silence should not be angered. Let it lie, move quietly, and do not speak at all.

Johanus wrote quickly, as if he might be interrupted; his goose pen snapped, and he seized another ready-cut. He spoke the words aloud as he wrote them, although his lips were closed.

"For days, and for nights when I could not sleep, I was aware of the presence of my invader. I told myself it was my fancy, but I could not be rid of the sensation of it. I listened for the sounds of breathing, I looked for a shadow—there were none of these. I felt no touch, and when I dozed fitfully in the dark, waking suddenly, no beast crouched on my breast. Yet it was with me, it breathed, it brushed by me, it *touched* me without hands, and watched me with its unseen eyes.

"So passed five days and four nights. And on the evening of the fifth day, even as the silver planet stood above the garden, it grew bold, knowing by now it had little to fear from me in my terror, and took on a shape.

"Yes, it took on a sort of shape, but if this is its reality I cannot know, or only some semblance, all it can encompass here, or deigns to assume.

"It hung across the window, and faintly through it the light of dusk was ebbing. A membraneous thing, like a sail. It did not move, no pulse

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of life seemed in it, and yet it lived. I shut the door on it, but later I returned. In the candle's light I saw it had fallen, or lowered itself, to my table. It had kept its soft sheen of blue. I touched it, I could not help myself, and it had the texture of velum—that is, of skin. It lay before me, the length of the table, and under it dimly I could discern the outline of my books, my dish of powders, and other things. I cannot describe my state. My terror had sunk into a sort of blinded wonderment. I do not know how great a while I stood and looked at it, but at length I heard the girl with my food, and I went out and locked up the room again. What would it do while I was gone? Would it perhaps vanish again?

"That night I slept, stupefied, and in the morning opened my eyes and there the thing hung, above me, inside the canopy of the very bed. How long had it been there, watching me with its invisible organs of sight? Of course, its method had been simple, it had slid under the doors of my house—my house so long dressed for it, and named for its planet in the common vernacular.

"What now must I do? What is required of me? For clearly I shall become its slave. It seems to me I am supposed able to give it a more usual form, some camouflage, so that it may pass with men, but how is that possible? *How* render such a thing ordinary, and attractive?

"The means came to me in my sleep. Perhaps the being has influenced my brain. There is one sure way. It has noticed my canvases. Now I am to stretch this skin upon a frame, and put paint to it. What shall I figure there? No doubt, I shall be guided in what I do, as it has led me to the idea.

"I must obscure my actions from my servants. They are already ill-at-ease, and the man was very threatening this morning, he is a ruffian and capable of anything—it will be wise to destroy these papers, when all else is done."

Jonquil turned from Johanus, and saw a group of friends she had not communicated with in three years, gliding over the lagoon in a white boat. They waved and shouted, and Jonquil knew she had been rescued, she would escape, but running toward the boat she heard a metallic crash, and jumped inadvertantly up out of the dream into the room, where her candles were burning low, fluttering, and the air quivered like a disturbed pond. The silence had been agitated after all. There had been some noise, like the noise in the dream which woke her.

She sat bolt upright in the lock of fear. She had never felt fear in this way in her life. She had meant to stay awake, but the meal, the wine . . .

And the dream of Johanus—absurd.

Outside, in the mirrored nighttime salon, there came a sharp screeching *scrape*.

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Jonquil's mind shrieked, and she clamped her hand over her mouth. *Don't be a fool. Listen!* She listened. The silence. Had she imagined—

The noise came again, harsher and more absolute.

It was like the abrasion of a rusty chain dragged along the marble floor.

And again—

Jonquil sprang up. In her life, where she had never before known such fear, the credo had been that fear, confronted, proved to be less than it had seemed. Always the maxim held true. It was this brain-washing of accredited experience which sent her to the door of the room, and caused her to dash it wide and to stare outward.

The guttering glim of the candles, so apposite to the house, gave a half-presence to the salon. But mostly it was black, thick and composite, black, watery and uncertain on the ruined faces of the mirrors. And out of this blackness came a low flicker of motion, catching the candlelight along its edge. And this motion made the sound she had heard and now heard again. Jonquil did not believe what she saw. She did not believe it. No. This was still the dream, and she must, she *must* wake up.

The picture of Johnina, painted by the astrologer on a piece of membraneous bluish alien skin, had fallen over in its frame, and now the framed skin pulled itself along the floor, and, catching the light, Jonquil saw the little formless excrescences of the face-down canvas, little bluish yellow paws, hauling the assemblage forward, the big balanced oblong shape with its rim of gilt vaguely shining. Machinelike, primeval, a mutated tortoise. It pulled itself on, and as the frame scraped along the floor it screamed, toward Jonquil in the doorway.

Jonquil slammed shut the door. She turned and caught up things—the inflatable bed, the table—and stuffed them up against the doorway! And the mechanical tortoise screamed twice more—and struck against the door, and the door shook.

Jonquil turned round and round in her trap as the thing outside thudded back and forth and her flimsy barricade trembled and tottered. There was no other exit but the window. She got it open and ran onto the balcony, which creaked and dipped. The weed was there, the blue-green Venus weed which choked the whole city. Jonquil threw herself off into it. As she did so, the door of the room gave way.

She was half climbing, half rebounding and falling down the wall of the house. Everywhere was darkness, and below the sucking of the water at the pavement.

As she struggled in the ropes of weed, tangled, clawing, a shape reared up in the window above her.

Jonquil cried out. The painting was in the window. But something comically macabre had happened. In rearing, it had caught at an angle

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between the uprights of the shutters. It was stuck, could not move out or in.

Jonquil hung in the weed, staring up at Johnina in her frame of gilt and wood and plaster and night. How soulless she looked, how without life.

And then a convulsion went over the picture. Like a blue amoeba touched by venom it writhed and wrinkled. It tore itself free of the golden frame. It billowed out, still held by a few filaments and threads, like a sail, a veil, the belly of something swollen with the hunger of centuries—

And Jonquil fought, and dropped the last two meters from the weed, landing on the pavement hard, in the box of darkness that was the city.

She was not dreaming, but it was like a dream. It seemed to her she saw herself running. The engine of her heart drove her forward. She did not know where or through what she ran. There was no moon, there were no lights. A kind of luminescence filmed over the atmosphere, and constructions loomed suddenly at her, an arch, a flight of steps, a platform, a severed wall. She fell, and got up and ran on.

And behind her, *that* came. That which had ripped itself from an oblong of gilding. It had taken to the air. It flew through the city, between the pillars and under the porticoes, along the ribbed arteries carrying night. It rolled and unrolled as it came, with a faint soft snapping. And then it sailed, wide open, catching some helpful draft, a huge pale bat.

Weed rushed over Jonquil and she thought the thing which had been called Johnina had settled on her lightly, coaxingly, and she screamed. The city filled with her scream like an empty gourd with water.

There were no lights, no figures huddled at smouldering fires, no guards or watchmen, no villains, no one here to save her, no one even to be the witness of what must come, when her young heart finally failed, her legs buckled, when the sailing softness came down and covered her, stroking and devouring, caressing and eating—its tongues and fingers and the whole porous mouth that it was—to drink her away and away.

Jonquil ran. She ran over streets that were cratered as if by meteorites, through vaulted passages, beside the still waters of night and death. It occurred to her (to her stunned and now almost witless brain) to plunge into the lagoon, to swim toward the unseen towers. But on the face of the mirror, gentleness would drift down on her, and in the morning mist, not even a ripple . . .

The paving tipped. Jonquil stumbled, ran, downward now, hopeless and mindless, her heart burning a hole in her side. Down and down, cracked tiles spinning off from her feet, down into some underground place that must be a prison for her, perhaps a catacomb, to stagger among filigree coffins, where the water puddled like glass on the floor, no way out, down into despair, and yet, mockingly, there was more light. More

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light to see what she did not want to see. It was the phosphorous of the death already there, the mummies in their narrow homes. Yes, she saw the water pools now, as she splashed through them, she saw the peculiar shelves and cubbies, the stone statue of a saint barnacled by the sea-rot the water brought into a creature from another world. And she saw the wall also that rose peremptory before her, the dead-end that would end in death, and for which she had been waiting, to which she had run, and where now she collapsed, her body useless, run out.

She dropped against the wall, and, in the coffin-light, turned and looked back. And through the descending vault, a pale blue shadow floated, innocent and faithful, coming down to her like a kiss.

I don't believe this, Jonquil would have said, but now she did. And anyway she had no breath, no breath even to scream again or cry. She could only watch, could not take her eyes off the coming of the feaster. It had singled her out, allowed her to bring it from the chest. With others it had been more reticent, hiding itself. Perhaps it had eaten of Johanus, too, before he had been forced to secure it against the witch-hunting servants. Or maybe Johanus had not been to its taste. How ravenous it was, and how controlled was its need.

It alighted five meters from her, from Jonquil, as she lay against the death-end wall. She saw it down an aisle of coffins. Touching the water on the floor, it rolled together, and furled open, and skimmed over the surface onto the stone.

She was fascinated now. She wanted it to reach her. She wanted it to be over. She dug her hands into the dirt and a yellow bone crumbled under her fingers.

The painting of Johnina was crawling along the aisle. There was no impediment, no heavy frame to drag with it.

Sweat slipped into Jonquil's eyes and for a moment she saw a blue woman with ivory hair walking slowly between the coffins, but there was something catching at her robe, and she hesitated, to try to pluck the material away.

Jonquil blinked. She saw a second movement, behind the limpid roll of the Venus skin. A flicker, like a white handkerchief. And then another.

Something darted, and it was on the painting, on top of it, and then it flashed and was gone. And then two other white darts sewed through the blueness of the shadow, bundling it up into an ungainly lump, and two more, gathering and kneading.

The painting had vanished. It was buried under a pure white jostling. And there began to be a thin high note on the air, like a whistling in the ear, without any emotion or language. Ten white rats of the catacombs had settled on the painting, and with their teeth and busy paws, they held it still and rent it in pieces, and they ate it. They ate the painted

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image of the Venus Johnina, and her background of mountains and sea, they ate the living shrieking membrane of the flesh. Their hunger too had been long unappeased.

Jonquil lay by the wall, watching, until the last crumb and shred had disappeared into dainty needled mouths. It did not take more than two or three minutes. Then there was only a space, nothing on it, no rats, no other thing.

"Get up," Jonquil said. There was a low singing in her head, but no other noise. She stood in stages, and went back along the aisle of dead. She was very cold, feeble and sluggish. She thought she felt old. She walked through the water pools. She had a dreadful intimation that everything had changed, that she would never be the same, that nothing ever would, that survival had sent her into an unknown and fearful world.

A rat sat on a coffin overseeing her departure, digesting in its belly blueness and alien dreams. The walls went on crumbling particle by particle. Silence flowed over the city like the approaching sea. ●

NEXT ISSUE

(continued from page 59)

Hugo-winner **Mike Resnick** pits the indomitable Teddy Roosevelt against a foe he can't beat in a battle he can't win, in a thoughtful portrait of "The Bull Moose At Bay"; new writer **Peni R. Griffin** spins a sprightly tale that shows us the magic—and the danger—to be found in "Books"; Nebula and World Fantasy Award-winner **Kim Stanley Robinson** gives us a vivid, unsettling glimpse of "Vinland the Dream"; **Alexander Jablokov** takes us to a future Boston that has become a nexus of interstellar trade—and a hotbed of interstellar intrigue—for a suspenseful tale of life (and death) in a complex human-alien underworld society, in "The Adoption"; **Jack McDevitt** returns to open a window into a turbulent and dangerous past, in "Time's Arrow"; and **Leonard Carpenter** makes a gripping *IAsfm* debut with a tale of menace and ancient magic set among the tourist-haunted classical ruins of modern-day Greece, in the very scary "Torso." *Plus* an array of columns and features.

Whew! *Now* how much would you pay? Well, what you *will* pay for all this is less than the price of the average paperback novel these days, for considerably *more* wordage, and an incomparably greater range of different *kinds* of reading material in one package, from many different authors, spanning a spectrum from the Biggest Names in the science fiction galaxy to the hottest and fastest-rising new stars in the business. How can you do better for your money?

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HOW I MET MY ST WIFE, JUANIT

by Robert Frazier

The author is still married to his first wife, Karol, but he does admit to havin made several of the "coast-to-eventu the-coast odysseys requisite to the sixt Mr. Frazier's latest publico include stories in *Amazing* and *New Pathways* (#16) and poems in *IAsfm*, and *Ne Awards #25.*

art: Roger Raupp

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The incident started out like many in the '60s—with an automobile and a good-looking woman. My buddy Fax and I were hitching to the Bay Area; I for solace for yet another broken heart, Fax to find and, no doubt, break again as many solaceable young hearts as possible. And someplace in all the Sunday sunrise flatlands of far western Iowa, where the same churches sat on the same gridlike squares of acreage and held the same rows of feedcapped hog farmers as the last hundred podunk towns, we scored a ride on the interstate ramp, heading to Denver. After sharing amenities with Tom, of last year's Oldsmobile, Fax and I tipped our heads back and slept the slumber of the dead.

I awoke, gabbed, fell back again, and we both awoke for good in the heartland of Nebraska, though it could still have been Des Moines or Council Bluffs for all we could tell, or Neptune. And Mister Tom could have been Fax's dad, sharing the jet black hair and chiseled features that Martin Faxler inherited from Navajo genes. But Tom wasn't Indian. Minnesota mongrel, the man claimed as he shared a plastic jug of water with us. Czech; Norwegian; Eskimo; Lutheran. That was all Fax needed. He started into one of his tireless raps, about how every person in the world was a mongrel, just bastards to be taxed and sent off to war, and had just reached the part on how we should band together against the W.A.S.P. military-industrial complex and what was going down in Vietnam, when a yellow station wagon pulling a low trailer pulled alongside us and started to beep its horn. Then beeped again.

Now, Tom was a traveling salesman, and by this time—past that quirky jog in the Nebraska interstate—he had entertained us with traveler's tales. He impressed Fax's nineteen-going-on-twenty-one mind with how much he'd seen, how fast he'd driven, and, yes, how much he drank; but he was still an Oldsmobile man, still wore a tweed suit and still used pomade to an excess. At first Tom thought his lights were on. Then he thought that they were warning him about a speed trap, and he pointed at his own speedometer and smiled to them, acknowledging their friendly advice. But when the occupants of the other car continued to gesture, making odd hand signals, leaning out their windows, he had no choice . . . he got paranoid.

"Jesus, what's *wrong* with these folk? Waving at us like this. Have we got something riding on our roof? Check up there, young man." He pointed to Fax, who sat in the front with him. "Never know when one of them alien things might be sneaking up on you. It's all they talk about in these parts. UFOs and alien things."

Fax soon pulled his head back in the car, settled down, and rolled the window up fast to keep the air conditioning in.

He said, "Nope."

"What you mean 'nope'? Must of seen *something,* kid."

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"Nothing." Fax saw himself as a man at nineteen, not a young man or a kid, and when he wasn't in control of the conversation, he spoke in remedial Cro-Magnon. "I see noth-thing."

"Well, what the hell are they excited about? Is that a stolen car? Is there a madhouse around here?"

"There's a prison," I said. Myself, I was never in control of a conversation, but I could fuel it with pertinent facts. That was my role. The savvy sidekick. The back seat trivia king. "Yes. A federal penitentiary exists around where the North and South Platte converge. Maximum security, I think."

That was all Tom needed to go off the dial. "Jesus! Just our luck. Can see the headlines now. The *Lincoln Inquirer,* Summer of '69 Special. Hapless Driver Run Off Road by Jail Breakers. Three Left For Dead."

I squeezed along the back past my duffel and Fax's suitcase until I was on the side facing the faster lanes. The station wagon eased closer to us, and their driver was doing an admirable job of matching Tom's attempts at slowing down and then speeding away. Tom started to swerve.

"I'll teach this jerk."

"There's a kid in the back," I said. "No, two kids. They're mundane. Maybe they just want you to roll your window down and talk."

"Oh." Just like that. "Oh." Like a man resigned to the electric chair. Tom straightened out the wheel and opened his window all the way.

They were back-to-the-landers. A city couple gone native. It turned out that they had a hitchhiker aboard, named Amy, and they were going to exit the interstate about five miles up, and disappear into the hills to their homestead, organic chickens and all. Were we traveling further? Could we stop and take on the hitchhiker? It would be night soon, they said, and this was no place for a girl.

"Yeah," Fax told Tom. "Why not?"

And Tom, sensing that he'd be considered a hick or a fossilized turd if he didn't, yelled out, "Yeah, why not!"

So we threw her hiking pack and our luggage in the trunk, and squeezed Amy into the back with me: a straw blonde, eyes blue as the shadows on a glacier, athletic legs, freckles, and a plain, scrubbed-clean face. She possessed a healthy glow that made her sexy. She wore ankle bracelets, jeans cut off to shorts, and a ragged flannel shirt patched with colorful materials, the brightest seeming to shore up her ample foothills. Amy was a mountain girl, and we were headed toward twilight and the Rockies. For someone who fell in love at a glance, wholly and absolutely, that was all I needed. All I needed.

Unable to keep pace with twilight, we fell behind into night. Tom branched south and eventually crossed into Wray, Colorado. Population:

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Vanished. He drove through empty and over-bright streets, looking for fast food.

I'd done a fair job of holding up a dialogue, revealing as much about my unrequited loves and failed ambitions as Amy revealed about being a farm girl in Pennsylvania, but she seemed more animated when Fax spoke to her from the front seat. He spouted outrage and politics. Romantic ideals. Grade A Numero Uno Martin Faxler Bullshit. As much a pose as Faxler's uniform of faded denim. If I'd been more objective, or less naïve, both of which were impossible at the time, I might have realized sooner that the pheromones that were leaking off this girl weren't directed toward me. The electricity was a front-to-back thing. So when we found an A&W with two pickup trucks parked to the side, and Tom and I piled out to order us burgers and root beer, I accepted at face value my buddy's offer to switch places with me, affording me a "relief" to stretch my legs in the front seat. We fed our faces, while Fax started anew with Amy about the military-industrial complex. He milked that for half an hour, then latched onto one of her pet beliefs—music is love. Told her about the peace messages of groups like the Sons of Champlain and The Youngbloods, and about the string of Dead concerts we'd followed west, and about how one of the drummers had quit in shame after his father, as band manager, had ripped the Dead off. She was so concerned. It was truly sad, Fax agreed. This was all *my* information he used, pertinent facts I'd shared with him, but from that point on I was locked out. I rode in the death seat beside Mr. Tom as the man tensed at the helm, fearful of the electrical storm that flashed in pitchforks on the horizon ahead, illuminating the foothills and sometimes the jagged peaks beyond.

Tom and I were silent, both working at being unattentive, working hard at ignoring the self-deceptions that blossomed behind us into romance.

Tom ran out of energy as the interstate entered the dissipating smog banks of the Mile High suburbs, and since neither Tom nor Amy knew a place to crash, and since Fax and I had considered stopping over in Denver for a week of play, we offered them the house we'd been welcomed to. Or so we thought. The guy I knew, Sid, lived in this peeling Victorian on Irving Street with his petite girlfriend Michelle, but Sid was now in jail and out of favor. Not with her, necessarily, but with his friends, Ken and Jake, who paid the lease. We parked the Oldsmobile on a weedy scrap of lawn at the rear, and I found this all out about an hour after collapsing on an unzipped sleeping bag on the floor of Sid and Michelle's basement room. Collapsing and not getting up. Just dreaming about Amy, my mountain girl.

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One of the dudes in residence, Jake, strolled in and flipped on the overhead lights, waking 'Chelle in her bed. I was slow to stir, so he started his speech to her before I was fully atuned.

Jake was put out. He'd come home after a long day in the mill, sleep on his mind, and found Running Bear balling Little White Dove in his bed. So much *involved,* he said, as if that spoke volumes of Kama Sutra, that the two took no notice of him. Jake did not appreciate this, and had found out from Ken that they were Sid's friends. 'Chelle said how she'd warned them Sid might have some people pass through that summer, and that Ken had told her Jake was staying the night in the city with "Tomona." Jake didn't hear that, though. He was piss drunk, and he had a Hidden Agenda. The Jakes of the world always do. I reached full consciousness at this point, as his voice peaked, and I found someone out of The Furry Freak Brothers pacing the room, with long side chops, a goatee, and a leather cowboy hat to match his fringed shirt. He gesticulated like a baboon on acid.

"Goddamn that Sid. He's the one got us in this mess. Your boyfriend Sid. So goddamned smart, this Sid."

"All right, Jake."

"No. It ain't all right, 'Chelle. It ain't fuckin' all right!"

'Chelle was sitting up with her glasses on and her chest flopped out of the slippery sheets. She kept tossing back her head of chocolate brown hair, which made her assets quiver. Either she lacked a self-conscious attitude, or she knew how to distract Jake. She emphasized her weak French accent by pronouncing the "J" in his name like a whispered "Shh."

"Look. I didn't say to take him along. That was your idea."

"Yeah. But you kept sayin', 'Sid's a smart guy. Sid's real bright.' Yeah, so smart he was dumb. I'm talkin' stupid. Pure moron."

Jake was not to be distracted.

"So bright that after he gets through customs he walks back to talk to us. He drops the case at the soda bar, then walks back to where they're checkin' us through, and he says, 'What do I do now, Jake?' You should have seen the look on the faces of the Customs Agents." Jake grimaced. "We weren't just busted. We were *laughed* at . . . "

'Chelle said, "And *he's* suffering for it. You wouldn't put up his bail."

"Damn straight."

"You know, Jake, *I* can't raise that kind of bread. Not as a waitress."

"You could raise it, but you won't. You ain't callin' Papa."

"So we've both left Sid inside to rot."

"*He* rots! We're *all* goin' up cause of him. I could do ten years! Ten kilos, ten *rotten* fuckin' years!"

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Jake was yelling again, but 'Chelle looked unruffled. I was watching and gaining new respect for her composure.

I said, "She didn't do it, Jake."

He shook with rage and said, "You shut up! It's none of your business!"

"Jake," 'Chelle said. "I didn't do it."

"I know! You don't keep up your share, but I let you stay. I let you stay 'cause Sid and I were brothers. Once. Yeah, *Sid.* Hear that? Once! That's all I owe him, 'Chelle. I don't have to feed Sid's friends. And I *damn* well don't have to listen to 'em moanin' from *my bed.*"

"Kick them out, then. Send them down here to the laundry room."

"There's some redneck crashed in there."

"Look," she said while shifting under the sheets. "Do you want *me* to do it? Want me to move them?"

That froze Jake in place. He stood at the end of her bed, staring at her breasts. Wondering, perhaps, if she'd rise right off of the mattress naked and march down the hall to please his whim. Suddenly he didn't seem so sure of himself. His voice lowered.

"Nah. I'll sleep in Ken's room. He's left for some big outdoor concert back east."

"Then I can go back to sleep?"

"Yeah. Only I want them out tomorrow."

"Okay, Jake," she said. "No sweat," I added.

Jake glared at me and stomped out of the room. He'd left the lights on. He was a figure that every story in life must have. The luminous, eccentric individual who walks on stage, and afterward you never see him again.

I let out a sigh. "There's a man who needs to get laid. He's tensed up like a spring."

"I don't care about him," she said, her accent gone. Her eyes were brown, softer with her glasses off. They were turned on me now. She reached out a hand.

"Come here."

I lurched up, thinking I'd hold her, then she'd burble or cry, then we'd sleep at last. But that was not the case.

"I'm tense also," she said as she tugged my briefs down, pulled me under the covers. "I need another lover like I need another head. But just this once, Jeff. Just tonight."

My face was pressed against her, and I teased her nipples with my tongue. She clenched her teeth and spoke from the back of her throat.

"And then tomorrow, we go for a ride."

I spent a long time exploring the luminous eccentricities of Michelle before I let her body knock me cold into the deepest sleep I'd had for weeks. What a blow she dealt me. It was almost enough to blot out the

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pain over Amy, over falling for and then losing such an innocent girl, all in one afternoon. Almost enough.

The day trip Michelle drove us on was no less crazed, no less bizarre under the circumstances, but certainly beautiful in the spell it cast over me. After seeing Tom to a motel—from which he planned to sell adding machines and so charge the motel off as a business expense—we drove south, past Englewood. We snaked up steeper and steeper anticlines of road, finally leveling out past Pikes Peak and heading the Volkswagen bus up a valley. We followed a river back toward its headwaters. North Platte. South Platte. The Arkansas. I had them confused. They certainly started off the same mountain sides, yet, considering the proximity of Denver, this must have been the South Platte River.

The water rushed along at a decent clip, tumbling north in white froth and spinning around bends where gravel built in bars on the slower, inside edges. The trees weren't virgin, but they were stately firs. Most campsites existed in clusters of two or three. 'Chelle pulled abruptly off the road to a secluded one, and parked at the base of a spine of rock that had detoured the river into a looping bend. A green tent sat on the top.

"This is it. Mountain Bill's. Once his groceries are unpacked, I could leave any time." She flipped up her sunglasses. "Those who want to go back and rough it in the city can. You can look up your friend the salesman. Whatever. And those who wish to stay are welcome to stay. Bill likes visitors."

She'd been perfunctory all morning, but this speech seemed to be the nadir of her mood. After that, she loosened up. Walked with the three of us on the rock ledges, shared bread and wine through a long lazy afternoon, waved to people "tubing" on inner tubes along the river, and even skinnydipped with me in a swirling, crystalline pool.

We toweled off in the shade of a big tree overhanging a narrow sand bar. We even toweled each other off, which 'Chelle enjoyed. Maybe too much. As I rubbed her back and then her thighs with the towel, she turned. Suddenly.

"You're not supposed to come back with me. You know that."

"I do?" I pursed my lips. "Yeah, I guess I do."

She put her arms out straight and rested them on my shoulders.

"I don't need any more temptations. And you proved last night just how much of one you are."

"Hmm. That's some consolation."

She hugged me then, skin to skin. But where sexual tension had bristled just moments before, there was only resolve in her. The hug was affectionate, yet platonic. My sister would have hugged me like that.

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"Good," she said with a smile. "You'll like it here. Until you and Fax are ready to hit the road again."

She pulled her shorts on, but ignored her top. The sun knifed through the trees and dappled her with warmth. She sat on a boulder and had begun to dry her hair when a clean-cut blond—maybe twenty, red check shirt, granny glasses—turned the corner.

"Hi, Bill."

"Hey, babe," he said. He was not disturbed in the least by my nudity, or her half nudity. It occurred to me that Bill might have been another of her unnecessary temptations. Did she drive them all into the mountains and leave them? Then supply them long distance?

"Sorry I was gone when you arrived," he said. "I was hiking in the woods. I noticed some funny lights out there last night." He shuffled about, approaching no closer than ten feet. "I would have brought the food up. You should have left the bags in the van."

"I had help," 'Chelle said.

"I saw." He looked me over. "I see."

"They're good folk. This is Jeff. Jeff Brown."

"Hi," I said. I wasn't about to stand up and shake his hand. But then I didn't have to. He walked up to where I was struggling into my jeans and did it for me.

"Howdy, Jeff. I hope you can stay. The other two . . ." He rolled his eyes. "The *other* two up there said you were thinking about it. I could use the company."

He turned back to 'Chelle. "In fact, I have some fresh quail eggs from a guy up the road in Hartsel. Why doesn't everyone stay until after dark? I won't hold you up past nine-thirty, so you'll be back in Denver for the midnight news."

"Well," she said, rubbing her neck with the towel. "Tuesdays I have to be at the diner by seven in the morning. And I could use the sleep." She frowned at me, then smiled. "Oh hell, why not."

"Why not?" I echoed.

That was when the hail started.

We scrambled up the rocky outcropping for the tent, pulling on the rest of our clothes, as Bill explained the weather.

"It does this almost every day. You watch. The sun will be out about six. Never lasts more than an hour."

I grunted and dashed for the tent, falling over Fax and Amy where they lay inside. We all did, and ended up laughing. Even "the other two." While they sat up in their bag and pulled on shirts, Bill snaked his arm into the bottom of a military-looking duffel and pulled out a Glad Bag rolled into a tube. He unwound with care. The hail pounded the sides of the tent like a drum roll.

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"Golden Sem. Flower tops. Got it from a Mexican that passed through here on vacation from Hermosillo."

Bill didn't pronounce the "H", and trilled the "Ls" into a "Y" sound. I had him pegged. He was the kind of man who was precise about his dope terms, and about the place of its origin. A fixation I'd seen before. Which means he was the kind of man who would make it up if he didn't know. He always *had to know*. Bill then did what I expected. He crushed a few buds on a *Rolling Stone* with a topless Jim Morrison, opened the flap on his pack of rolling papers, and used the flap's edge—systematically pushing the pile up while the seeds rolled down the pink cover and Morrison's jeans. Of course, he kept the seeds in another baggie. And rolled a tight, streamlined cigarette. All for his audience. I felt kindly toward the man. He was a known quantity.

In fact, they all were. The native wolf-boy whose pack I ran with. His quiet, pretty new victim, whom I was tragically romantic about. The screwed-up but loveable girl of my boyhood friend, Sid. And Mountain Bill. By the second toke, I was getting comfortable. Celebrating privately. It was after 6:11, Mountain Time. I'd made it to my twenty-first birthday.

"It'll be turning dark soon," said Bill. "The mountains cut off the late sunsets. And wait until you see the Milky Way and the stars. There's millions of them. Millions and millions."

This was before Sagan.

"Man, I'd never *seen* so many until I made my escape up here."

"Escape?" inquired Fax. He sounded like Tom back on the Nebraska highway, with a station wagon of faceless crazies beeping at him.

"I forgot to tell them," 'Chelle said to Bill. She let out a suppressed laugh.

"Oh." Bill blushed for effect, then his jaw tightened. "I'm AWOL from the Air Force. I didn't get much past basic training. There was no way I was going to 'Nam. We don't belong over there."

"Amen," my buddy said. This was remedial Fax. Wolf-boy had met his match in Mountain Bill.

I said, "We never did. The Gulf of Tonkin was a faked incident."

"Well, I like the starlight," said Amy. "It's like moonlight. You can see where you walk at night."

'Chelle also preferred to return to this line of thought, ignoring their discussion of the war. "Yeah. I always wondered why it wasn't much brighter at night. I mean, if there's an infinite amount of starlight falling on us, it shouldn't get dark. Even if the far away stars are fainter."

"There's good science in that thinking," Bill said in a patronizing voice. "Very good, Michelle."

That caused a stoned rush in my head. Bill was scoring points with 'Chelle. They'd been lovers, and he saw me as competition.

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Bill continued, spreading his arms in a grand gesture. "Yet science can't define everything. There are many phenomena that defy explanation. There always have to be Mysteries. The Zen factor, you know."

Amy sighed. Another chick impressed.

Time for my vote. "Olbers' Paradox," I said. "Straight math states that doubling the distance from earth increases the volume of space by eight, while the light only weakens by a factor of four. We should have plenty of accumulated starlight. The hidden assumptions are that space is actually infinite, and that all the stars have had time to send their light from there to here. Both wrong, it turns out. Space is still expanding, the visible edge pushing further as we speak. It's finite. The speed of light is finite as well, and since space is only ten or fifteen billion years old, we're only getting light from stars up to, say, fifteen billion light years away. No mystery shit there." I coughed on a particularly harsh drag of smoke. "Nothing Zen. The solution to Olbers' Paradox has been around since the 1920s."

I coughed again. Bill said, "Hey, man. You're wasting dope."

But the damage was done. Both Amy and Michelle were looking at me like groupies hung up on a rock star. Now things felt comfortable. Truly comfortable.

Fax grunted, "Munchies."

Bill sat up straight and started to whet his pocket knife on a sharpening stone. Ready for any occasion. Ready to score more points with some display of gourmet outdoorsmanship. But 'Chelle cut him short.

"Amy and I will do the honors, Bill. You could use a rest from your own cooking. And I brought you up a kitchen knife."

Poor Bill. Doubly deflated. He had no recourse but to try and talk politics with Fax, another mistake, since Fax could bullshit rings around Bill's intellectual approach. I wandered out with the women, marveling with them at hail balls melting in colors on the picnic table, and at the fabulous pine smells rising from the dusky shadows. I showed them my quick method of twisting the skins off garlic cloves.

That was when the three-legged Doberman loped into the campsite.

"Hey, Bill," 'Chelle called. "You got a dog now?"

Bill pushed open the flap and looked out. The male dog had sniffed around our feet and lay down by the table to lick his stub. Bill's eyes bulged.

"Ah, no. Ah. I've never seen that one."

Fax said, "Probably belongs to a new camper."

This Doberman was healthy, but thin around the ribs. Scratched up. Stuck with burrs that Amy began to pluck. Her farm-girl sense could see that this was not a domestic pet. It didn't lick people's hands or whine or act obeisant either. Not domestic at all.

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"Stray," I mumbled. Amy nodded and gave me a coy look.
I added, "Let's call him Olbers."

The name stuck. Long after dusk, with the cook fire burning nicely in the stone fireplace and egg-stained paper plates strewn where we sat on the ground, Fax cleared the table and stretched out along it, on his stomach, staring into the flames.

"Where's Olbers?" he said to Bill. "He was cleaning up the omelet pan a moment ago."

"The *dog* is in the tent."

Bill stirred the coals with a branch, poked under the mass to increase the oxygen flow, arranged the logs with care. And he wondered, no doubt, why no one noticed what a good job he was doing. 'Chelle and Amy were leaning against the same tree that I leaned against. We were still sharing a homemakers' camaraderie. Singing the lyrics to old blues songs like "Come On In My Kitchen" and "Dust My Broom."

"Well, Bill." Fax wanted to start a conversation with him, with someone. "Shouldn't you kick Olbers *out* of the tent? You gotta sleep in there. This is territorial imperative."

Bill looked over at the tent and shrugged.

But Fax was Fax. "Come on, man. Let's do it."

Bill said, "It's time for S'mores."

He stood and rummaged through the bags near the tent, pulling out marshmallows, Hershey bars, and graham crackers. Fax started to fiddle with the portable radio he'd found under a bench next to the table.

"Christ. Maybe I can pick up a California station. With some good tunes. The Airplane, maybe. Or the Quicksilver Messenger Circus."

'Chelle said, "Service. Messenger *Service*." Amy laughed.

Fax thumbed the volume up loud and spun the dial through various degrees of white noise, hoping to drown out 'Chelle and me doing "Who Do You Love?" He managed to find The Grassroots. Then John Denver.

That was when the alien hobbled into the firelight.

Our singing stopped at the chorus. My heart did a flip-flop. This was a Grade A For Real Alien. He looked human in chinos and a white shirt, but he was soaked to the skin. That flattened out his hair and showed a longer, egg-shaped skull. Subtle, perhaps, but observable. What was truly obvious, and needed no such subtle suppositions, was his third arm. He stepped into the campsite using a shotgun as a crutch, and using three arms to brace himself against the stock of the weapon. A fourth hand fluttered within an opening torn in his shirt front.

"Me ayudas," he said.

"What?" I asked. "Foreign aid?"

"Me ayudas. Es necesito. Comprendes?"

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I shook my head. An alien that only spoke broken Spanish!

Amy stepped toward him. "He's hurting. Can't you see?"

Olbers shot through the flap of the tent, and my heart did another flip-flop. I expected the dog to protect Amy. Instead, Olbers sat in front of the creature and wagged his tail. Which is a feat for a Doberman.

"Move over, Fax." I stood and pointed at the bench. "Let the man sit. He's busted a leg or an ankle."

"Tengo dolor," the alien said, over and over.

The women helped him to the picnic table, but they sat him on the end, with his leg dangling over. 'Chelle leaned his gun against a tree and poured hot water from Bill's coffee pot into a clean pan. Amy used the kitchen knife to cut the pant cuff of his trousers. They tore the pantleg along a blood-stained rip until they found what looked like a deformation. Fractured or broken about ten inches below the knee cap, but not messy. The alien braced himself on the table with two hands, and tried to hide his extra arms back inside his clothes. I pulled one of his hands back out, gently, and wadded a shred of his shirt tail into it. I gestured that he should bite down on the wad, to help the pain. He understood. The girls washed up his superficial cuts and scrapes. Then swabbed alcohol supplied by Bill. "Time for a splint," said Bill. He poked at some flat kindling boards he kept near the fire.

Fax turned to me with an incredulous look. "What's next?"

The alien struggled to get his fourth arm free, and made a gesture by touching his thumb and forefinger to his lips to make an "O" shape. He spit out the wad of cloth.

"Cigarrillo. Cigarrillo."

"I don't think so." "None of us smoke." *"Nada."*

He pointed to a roach lying on one of the paper plates.

"Cigarrillo," he said, with a raise of his eyebrows.

My buddy caught on. "I'll do the honors, Bill. You're busy."

Fax slipped inside the tent and returned with the infamous baggie, then rolled a fat zeppelin, using three Easy Widers. Bill's cool evaporated.

"Hey . . ."

Amy glared at him, then at Fax. "Let the man have it. The whole thing. He crossed the river like this."

Bill nodded, reluctantly. Fax nodded and lit the joint to get it going. I petted Olbers, while Michelle and Amy and Bill did their doctoring thing. The alien smoked, exploring the radio with his fourth hand. He motioned to me, twisting the air over it like he was driving a screw into wood. I reached down and slipped Bill's knife out of his back pocket; I knew it would have a screwdriver blade. The alien used it to open up the back of the radio, and when Bill looked up from tying the splint, his eyes bulged.

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'Chelle patted Bill's head. "I'll bring you Sid's Sony on my next trip."

Next, the alien twisted a bunch of wires together and called into the radio's speaker like it was a telephone. He made a sound like a basso flute, deep and sonorous. The radio answered back, and they traded clicks and whistles. The alien stood up suddenly and leaned on me, before Bill could finish making the splint job professional.

"Es necesito. Es necesito."

Bill shrugged, hung his head where he kneeled. I thought I saw tears of frustration welling in his eyes. Amy dragged him up and gave him a sympathetic hug, much more than my sister would give. Much more melting. Meanwhile, Fax was comforting Michelle, who was finally crying over the situation. The intruder had changed the dynamics of the moment, they'd paired off, and there I was, stuck with old Four-Arms.

"Where to?" I said.

Four-Arms pointed into the darkness past the parking lot, and we started down the path to where 'Chelle had parked her VW. Once again, I had ended up as the one who ended up without a girl. I'd ended up as the one assigned to get the ET to a rendezvous site in the middle of nowhere.

"Great," I said to nobody. I hollered it out. "Goddamned great!"

There was no UFO down there, only a car, waiting at the mouth of the parking lot by the time we'd struggled to the bottom of the hill. A sleek yellow Olds, and this year's model at that. Four-Arms was a new breed of Oldsmobile man. "Things sure change fast," I mumbled.

The woman who stepped out from behind the wheel heard me. She took one look at Four-Arms, *showing* all four arms and giggling to himself, and she agreed.

"They sure do. Sorry if my brother has, ah . . . inconvenienced you."

The woman was quite young and quite beautiful. The same attenuated skull, and a bulge where she must have wrapped a pair of slim limbs around her stomach, but absolutely stunning. A sultry Mexican-American accent with hints of a soprano flute. Tall as I was. Hair like spun copper. Green eyes. Thin lips I longed, immediately, to run my tongue over.

"He can be a pain," she said. "He refuses to learn English."

I swallowed. Twice. "Yeah. Guess one Earth language was enough. Right?"

Her features hardened. She reassessed me with those killer eyes.

"You see the problem, then?"

Yes, I saw the problem. She was *way* out of my league.

"Hey," I said. "Anything else I can do?"

"Actually, I'd love it if you could drive. Juanita needs to make Juan presentable. Just in case."

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I laughed, remembering Fax's three-paper zeppelin. "That's not going to be easy."

"We'll manage." She bent to me, kissed me on the cheek.

To hell with it, I thought. I wasn't holding back by this time. I leaned to her, breathing the intoxicating strangeness of her skin. I kissed her full on the mouth. She kissed back, hard yet pliable. And that sent a jolt of adrenalin through my plumbing like no drug or drink ever would. Nobody had ever fallen for me *this* fast, before I'd even fallen for them. No woman until Juanita; certainly no woman *like* Juanita. I wasn't even sure I could love someone who might abandon me at any time, let me out the side door like a stray, and go home—wherever home was for her.

We eased Juan into the back seat, and she joined him. She had a medicine kit and a new shirt ready. He protested. She insisted. I slipped in front, and drove where Juanita directed me. I tried to ignore the gauges and devices in the dashboard that weren't familiar to me, and there were plenty. They cast a purplish glow about the cab and colored the windshield. I kept my eyes on the road, the stars and the scenery shifting through my high beams, but even that became distracting. A plane—its lights looking more like an Edsel's—zig-zagged impossibly over our roof, then angled sharply up toward the head of the valley. I could see it clearly through the front glass, yet when I hung my head out the window, it was no longer visible. Back inside, it shone like a bright constellation. The same was true of a larger set of lights that hovered, unmoving on the horizon. Then, seen through the windshield only, a greenish beam shot up like a celery stalk from somewhere ahead, off the main road and on higher ground.

"That's where we're headed," she said. Her voice sounded like an invitation.

The location looked an hour away. That wasn't where she'd come from, not unless the Olds could levitate. But I didn't feel like mentioning it, didn't feel like pushing my luck. I eased my foot on the gas and began a series of sidewinding turns that would take us deeper into the Park Mountain Range.

From somewhere in the back, a hiding spot he'd found during my exchange with Juanita, Olbers squeezed between the front seats and sat on the passenger's side. He put his nose to the glass, and this seemed such a fitting pose to me, almost intelligent. As if to say, it was a big world out there, but a finite one. With a finite amount of light, and a finite amount of time left for him to explore it in. Why dwell on anything but the starlight and the road ahead? Why indeed? For once, I had the car *and* the girl. Olbers hadn't left a single thing behind at Bill's campsite. And, I decided, neither had I. ●

For Connie, and Kelly

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A courageous astronaut, stranded on the moon, finds that to survive she must physically and emotionally stretch her endurance to the limit on . . .

A WALK IN THE SUN

by Geoffrey A. Landis

art: Steve Cavallo

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The pilots have a saying: a good landing is any landing you can walk away from.

Perhaps Sanjiv might have done better, if he'd been alive. Trish had done the best she could. All things considered, it was a far better landing than she had any right to expect.

Titanium struts, pencil-slender, had never been designed to take the force of a landing. Paper-thin pressure walls had buckled and shattered, spreading wreckage out into the vacuum and across a square kilometer of lunar surface. An instant before impact she remembered to blow the tanks. There was no explosion, but no landing could have been gentle enough to keep *Moonshadow* together. In eerie silence, the fragile ship had crumpled and ripped apart like a discarded aluminum can.

The piloting module had torn open and broken loose from the main part of the ship. The fragment settled against a crater wall. When it stopped moving, Trish unbuckled the straps that held her in the pilot's seat and fell slowly to the ceiling. She oriented herself to the unaccustomed gravity, found an undamaged EVA pack and plugged it into her suit, then crawled out into the sunlight through the jagged hole where the living module had been attached.

She stood on the grey lunar surface and stared. Her shadow reached out ahead of her, a pool of inky black in the shape of a fantastically stretched man. The landscape was rugged and utterly barren, painted in stark shades of grey and black. "Magnificent desolation," she whispered. Behind her, the sun hovered just over the mountains, glinting off shards of titanium and steel scattered across the cratered plain.

Patricia Jay Mulligan looked out across the desolate moonscape and tried not to weep.

First things first. She took the radio out from the shattered crew compartment and tried it. Nothing. That was no surprise; Earth was over the horizon, and there were no other ships in cislunar space.

After a little searching she found Sanjiv and Theresa. In the low gravity they were absurdly easy to carry. There was no use in burying them. She sat them in a niche between two boulders, facing the sun, facing west, toward where the Earth was hidden behind a range of black mountains. She tried to think of the right words to say, and failed. Perhaps as well; she wouldn't know the proper service for Sanjiv anyway. "Goodbye, Sanjiv. Goodbye, Theresa. I wish—I wish things would have been different. I'm sorry." Her voice was barely more than a whisper. "Go with God."

She tried not to think of how soon she was likely to be joining them.

She forced herself to think. What would her sister have done? Survive.

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Karen would survive. First: inventory your assets. She was alive, miraculously unhurt. Her vacuum suit was in serviceable condition. Life-support was powered by the suit's solar arrays; she had air and water for as long as the sun continued to shine. Scavenging the wreckage yielded plenty of unbroken food packs; she wasn't about to starve.

Second: call for help. In this case, the nearest help was a quarter of a million miles over the horizon. She would need a high-gain antenna and a mountain peak with a view of Earth.

In its computer, *Moonshadow* had carried the best maps of the moon ever made. Gone. There had been other maps on the ship; they were scattered with the wreckage. She'd managed to find a detailed map of Mare Nubium—useless—and a small global map meant to be used as an index. It would have to do. As near as she could tell, the impact site was just over the eastern edge of Mare Smythii—"Smith's Sea." The mountains in the distance should mark the edge of the sea, and, with luck, have a view of Earth.

She checked her suit. At a command, the solar arrays spread out to their full extent like oversized dragonfly wings and glinted in prismatic colors as they rotated to face the sun. She verified that the suit's systems were charging properly, and set off.

Close up, the mountain was less steep than it had looked from the crash site. In the low gravity, climbing was hardly more difficult than walking, although the two-meter dish made her balance awkward. Reaching the ridgetop, Trish was rewarded with the sight of a tiny sliver of blue on the horizon. The mountains on the far side of the valley were still in darkness. She hoisted the radio higher up on her shoulder and started across the next valley.

From the next mountain peak the Earth edged over the horizon, a blue and white marble half-hidden by black mountains. She unfolded the tripod for the antenna and carefully sighted along the feed. "Hello? This is Astronaut Mulligan from *Moonshadow*. Emergency. Repeat, this is an emergency. Does anybody hear me?"

She took her thumb off the *transmit* button and waited for a response, but heard nothing but the soft whisper of static from the sun.

"This is Astronaut Mulligan from *Moonshadow*. Does anybody hear me?" She paused again. "*Moonshadow*, calling anybody. *Moonshadow*, calling anybody. This is an emergency."

"*—shadow, this is Geneva control. We read you faint but clear. Hang on, up there.*" She released her breath in a sudden gasp. She hadn't even realized she'd been holding it.

After five minutes the rotation of the Earth had taken the ground

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antenna out of range. In that time—after they had gotten over their surprise that there was a survivor of the *Moonshadow*—she learned the parameters of the problem. Her landing had been close to the sunset terminator; the very edge of the illuminated side of the moon. The moon's rotation is slow, but inexorable. Sunset would arrive in three days. There was no shelter on the moon, no place to wait out the fourteen day long lunar night. Her solar cells needed sunlight to keep her air fresh. Her search of the wreckage had yielded no unruptured storage tanks, no batteries, no means to lay up a store of oxygen.

And there was no way they could launch a rescue mission before nightfall.

Too many 'no's.

She sat silent, gazing across the jagged plain toward the slender blue crescent, thinking.

After a few minutes the antenna at Goldstone rotated into range, and the radio crackled to life. *"Moonshadow, do you read me? Hello, Moonshadow, do you read me?"*

"*Moonshadow* here."

She released the transmit button and waited in long silence for her words to be carried to Earth.

"Roger, Moonshadow. We confirm the earliest window for a rescue mission is thirty days from now. Can you hold on that long?"

She made her decision and pressed the transmit button. "Astronaut Mulligan for *Moonshadow*. I'll be here waiting for you. One way or another."

She waited, but there was no answer. The receiving antenna at Goldstone couldn't have rotated out of range so quickly. She checked the radio. When she took the cover off, she could see that the printed circuit board on the power supply had been slightly cracked from the crash, but she couldn't see any broken leads or components clearly out of place. She banged on it with her fist—Karen's first rule of electronics, if it doesn't work, hit it—and re-aimed the antenna, but it didn't help. Clearly something in it had broken.

What would Karen have done? Not just sit here and die, that was certain. Get a move on, kiddo. When sunset catches you, you'll die.

They had heard her reply. She had to believe they heard her reply and would be coming for her. All she had to do was survive.

The dish antenna would be too awkward to carry with her. She could afford nothing but the bare necessities. At sunset her air would be gone. She put down the radio and began to walk.

Mission Commander Stanley stared at the x-rays of his engine. It was

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four in the morning. There would be no more sleep for him that night; he was scheduled to fly to Washington at six to testify to Congress.

"Your decision, Commander," the engine technician said. "We can't find any flaws in the x-rays we took of the flight engines, but it could be hidden. The nominal flight profile doesn't take the engines to a hundred twenty, so the blades should hold even if there is a flaw."

"How long a delay if we yank the engines for inspection?"

"Assuming they're okay, we lose a day. If not, two, maybe three."

Commander Stanley drummed his fingers in irritation. He hated to be forced into hasty decisions. "Normal procedure would be?"

"Normally we'd want to reinspect."

"Do it."

He sighed. Another delay. Somewhere up there, somebody was counting on him to get there on time. If she was still alive. If the cut-off radio signal didn't signify catastrophic failure of other systems.

If she could find a way to survive without air.

On Earth it would have been a marathon pace. On the moon it was an easy lope. After ten miles the trek fell into an easy rhythm: half a walk, half like jogging, and half bounding like a slow-motion kangaroo. Her worst enemy was boredom.

Her comrades at the academy—in part envious of the top scores that had made her the first of their class picked for a mission—had ribbed her mercilessly about flying a mission that would come within a few kilometers of the moon without landing. Now she had a chance to see more of the moon up close than anybody in history. She wondered what her classmates were thinking now. She would have a tale to tell—if only she could survive to tell it.

The warble of the low voltage warning broke her out of her reverie. She checked her running display as she started down the maintenance checklist. Elapsed EVA time, eight point three hours. System functions, nominal, except that the solar array current was way below norm. In a few moments she found the trouble: a thin layer of dust on her solar array. Not a serious problem; it could be brushed off. If she couldn't find a pace that would avoid kicking dust on the arrays, then she would have to break every few hours to housekeep. She rechecked the array and continued on.

With the sun unmoving ahead of her and nothing but the hypnotically blue crescent of the slowly rotating Earth creeping imperceptibly off the horizon, her attention wandered. *Moonshadow* had been tagged as an easy mission, a low-orbit mapping flight to scout sites for the future moonbase. *Moonshadow* had never been intended to land, not on the moon, not anywhere.

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She'd landed it anyway; she had to.

Walking west across the barren plain, Trish had nightmares of blood and falling, Sanjiv dying beside her; Theresa already dead in the lab module; the moon looming huge, spinning at a crazy angle in the viewports. Stop the spin, aim for the terminator—at low sun angles, the illumination makes it easier to see the roughness of the surface. Conserve fuel, but remember to blow the tanks an instant before you hit to avoid explosion.

That was over. Concentrate on the present. One foot in front of the other. Again. Again.

The undervoltage alarm chimed again. Dust, already?

She looked down at her navigation aid and realized with a shock that she had walked a hundred and fifty kilometers.

Time for a break anyway. She sat down on a boulder, fetched a snack-pack out of her carryall, and set a timer for fifteen minutes. The airtight quick-seal on the food pack was designed to mate to the matching port in the lower part of her faceplate. It would be important to keep the seal free of grit. She verified the vacuum seal twice before opening the pack into the suit, then pushed the food bar in so she could turn her head and gnaw off pieces. The bar was hard and slightly sweet.

She looked west across the gently rolling plain. The horizon looked flat, unreal; a painted backdrop barely out of reach. On the moon, it should be easy to keep up a pace of fifteen or even twenty miles an hour—counting time out for sleep, maybe ten. She could walk a long, long way.

Karen would have liked it; she'd always liked hiking in desolate areas. "Quite pretty, in its own way, isn't it, Sis?" Trish said. "Who'd have thought there were so many shadings of grey? Plenty of uncrowded beach—too bad it's such a long walk to the water."

Time to move on. She continued on across terrain that was generally flat, although everywhere pocked with craters of every size. The moon is surprisingly flat; only one percent of the surface has a slope of more than fifteen degrees. The small hills she bounded over easily; the few larger ones she detoured around. In the low gravity this posed no real problem to walking. She walked on. She didn't feel tired, but when she checked her readout and realized that she had been walking for twenty hours, she forced herself to stop.

Sleeping was a problem. The solar arrays were designed to be detached from the suit for easy servicing, but had no provision to power the life-support while detached. Eventually she found a way to stretch the short cable out far enough to allow her to prop up the array next to her so she could lie down without disconnecting the power. She would have to be careful not to roll over. That done, she found she couldn't sleep. After a

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time she lapsed into a fitful doze, dreaming not of the *Moonshadow* as she'd expected, but of her sister, Karen, who—in the dream—wasn't dead at all, but had only been playing a joke on her, pretending to die.

She awoke disoriented, muscles aching, then suddenly remembered where she was. The Earth was a full handspan above the horizon. She got up, yawned, and jogged west across the gunpowder-grey sandscape.

Her feet were tender where the boots rubbed. She varied her pace, changing from jogging to skipping to a kangaroo bounce. It helped some; not enough. She could feel her feet starting to blister, but knew that there was no way to take off her boots to tend, or even examine, her feet.

Karen had made her hike on blistered feet, and had had no patience with complaints or slacking off. She should have broken her boots in before the hike. In the one-sixth gee, at least the pain was bearable.

After a while her feet simply got numb.

Small craters she bounded over; larger ones she detoured around; larger ones yet she simply climbed across. West of Mare Smythii she entered a badlands and the terrain got bumpy. She had to slow down. The downhill slopes were in full sun, but the crater bottoms and valleys were still in shadow.

Her blisters broke, the pain a shrill and discordant singing in her boots. She bit her lip to keep herself from crying and continued on. Another few hundred kilometers and she was in Mare Spumans—"Sea of Froth"—and it was clear trekking again. Across Spumans, then into the north lobe of Fecundity and through to Tranquility. Somewhere around the sixth day of her trek she must have passed Tranquility Base; she carefully scanned for it on the horizon as she traveled but didn't see anything. By her best guess she missed it by several hundred kilometers; she was already deviating toward the north, aiming for a pass just north of the crater Julius Caesar into Mare Vaporum to avoid the mountains. The ancient landing stage would have been too small to spot unless she'd almost walked right over it.

"Figures," she said. "Come all this way, and the only tourist attraction in a hundred miles is closed. That's the way things always seem to turn out, eh, Sis?"

There was nobody to laugh at her witticism, so after a moment she laughed at it herself.

Wake up from confused dreams to black sky and motionless sunlight, yawn, and start walking before you're completely awake. Sip on the insipid warm water, trying not to think about what it's recycled from. Break, cleaning your solar arrays, your life, with exquisite care. Walk. Break. Sleep again, the sun nailed to the sky in the same position it was in when you awoke. Next day do it all over. And again. And again.

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The nutrition packs are low-residue, but every few days you must still squat for nature. Your life support can't recycle solid waste, so you wait for the suit to dessicate the waste and then void the crumbly brown powder to vacuum. Your trail is marked by your powdery deposits, scarcely distinguishable from the dark lunar dust.

Walk west, ever west, racing the sun.

Earth was high in the sky; she could no longer see it without craning her neck way back. When the Earth was directly overhead she stopped and celebrated, miming the opening of an invisible bottle of champagne to toast her imaginary traveling companions. The sun was well above the horizon now. In six days of travel she had walked a quarter of the way around the moon.

She passed well south of Copernicus, to stay as far out of the impact rubble as possible without crossing mountains. The terrain was eerie, boulders as big as houses, as big as shuttle tanks. In places the footing was treacherous where the grainy regolith gave way to jumbles of rock, rays thrown out by the cataclysmic impact billions of years ago. She picked her way as best she could. She left her radio on and gave a running commentary as she moved. "Watch your step here, footing's treacherous. Coming up on a hill; think we should climb it or detour around?"

Nobody voiced an opinion. She contemplated the rocky hill. Likely an ancient volcanic bubble, although she hadn't realized that this region had once been active. The territory around it would be bad. From the top she'd be able to study the terrain for a ways ahead. "Okay, listen up, everybody. The climb could be tricky here, so stay close and watch where I place my feet. Don't take chances—better slow and safe than fast and dead. Any questions?" Silence; good. "Okay, then. We'll take a fifteen minute break when we reach the top. Follow me."

Past the rubble of Copernicus, Oceanus Procellarum was smooth as a golf course. Trish jogged across the sand with a smooth, even glide. Karen and Dutchman seemed to always be lagging behind or running up ahead out of sight. Silly dog still followed Karen around like a puppy, even though Trish was the one who fed him and refilled his water dish every day since Karen went away to college. The way Karen wouldn't stay close behind her annoyed Trish—Karen had *promised* to let her be the leader this time—but she kept her feelings to herself. Karen had called her a bratty little pest, and she was determined to show she could act like an adult. Anyway, she was the one with the map. If Karen got lost, it would serve her right.

She angled slightly north again to take advantage of the map's promise of smooth terrain. She looked around to see if Karen was there, and was surprised to see that the Earth was a gibbous ball low down on the

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horizon. Of course, Karen wasn't there. Karen had died years ago. Trish was alone in a spacesuit that itched and stank and chafed her skin nearly raw across the thighs. She should have broken it in better, but who would have expected she would want to go jogging in it?

It was unfair how she had to wear a spacesuit and Karen didn't. Karen got to do a lot of things that she didn't, but how come she didn't have to wear a spacesuit? *Everybody* had to wear a spacesuit. It was the rule. She turned to Karen to ask. Karen laughed bitterly. "I don't have to wear a spacesuit, my bratty little sister, because I'm *dead*. Squished like a bug and buried, remember?"

Oh, yes, that was right. Okay, then, if Karen was dead, then she didn't have to wear a spacesuit. It made perfect sense for a few more kilometers, and they jogged along together in companionable silence until Trish had a sudden thought. "Hey, wait—if you're dead, then how can you be here?"

"Because I'm not here, silly. I'm a fig-newton of your overactive imagination."

With a shock, Trish looked over her shoulder. Karen wasn't there. Karen had never been there.

"I'm sorry. Please come back. Please?"

She stumbled and fell headlong, sliding in a spray of dust down the bowl of a crater. As she slid she frantically twisted to stay face-down, to keep from rolling over on the fragile solar wings on her back. When she finally slid to a stop, the silence echoing in her ears, there was a long scratch like a badly healed scar down the glass of her helmet. The double reinforced faceplate had held, fortunately, or she wouldn't be looking at it.

She checked her suit. There were no breaks in the integrity, but the titanium strut that held out the left wing of the solar array had buckled back and nearly broken. Miraculously there had been no other damage. She pulled off the array and studied the damaged strut. She bent it back into position as best she could, and splinted the joint with a mechanical pencil tied on with two short lengths of wire. The pencil had been only extra weight anyway; it was lucky she hadn't thought to discard it. She tested the joint gingerly. It wouldn't take much stress, but if she didn't bounce around too much it should hold. Time for a break anyway.

When she awoke she took stock of her situation. While she hadn't been paying attention, the terrain had slowly turned mountainous. The next stretch would be slower going than the last bit.

"About time you woke up, sleepyhead," said Karen. She yawned, stretched, and turned her head to look back at the line of footprints. At the end of the long trail, the Earth showed as a tiny blue dome on the horizon, not very far away at all, the single speck of color in a landscape of uniform grey. "Twelve days to walk halfway around the moon," she

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said. "Not bad, kid. Not great, but not bad. You training for a marathon or something?"

Trish got up and started jogging, her feet falling into rhythm automatically as she sipped from the suit recycler, trying to wash the stale taste out of her mouth. She called out to Karen behind her without turning around. "Get a move on, we got places to go. You coming, or what?"

In the nearly shadowless sunlight the ground was washed-out, two dimensional. Trish had a hard time finding footing, stumbling over rocks that were nearly invisible against the flat landscape. One foot in front of the other. Again. Again.

The excitement of the trek had long ago faded, leaving behind a relentless determination to prevail, which in turn had faded into a kind of mental numbness. Trish spent the time chatting with Karen, telling the private details of her life, secretly hoping that Karen would be pleased, would say something telling her she was proud of her. Suddenly she noticed that Karen wasn't listening; had apparently wandered off on her sometime when she hadn't been paying attention.

She stopped on the edge of a long, winding rille. It looked like a riverbed just waiting for a rainstorm to fill it, but Trish knew it had never known water. Covering the bottom was only dust, dry as powdered bone. She slowly picked her way to the bottom, careful not to slip again and risk damage to her fragile life support system. She looked up at the top. Karen was standing on the rim waving at her. "Come *on!* Quit *dawdling,* you slowpoke—you want to stay here for*ever?"*

"What's the hurry? We're ahead of schedule. The sun is high up in the sky, and we're halfway around the moon. We'll make it, no sweat."

Karen came down the slope, sliding like a skiier in the powdery dust. She pressed her face up against Trish's helmet and stared into her eyes with a manic intensity that almost frightened her. "The hurry, my lazy little sister, is that you're halfway around the moon, you've finished with the easy part and it's all mountains and badlands from here on, you've got six thousand kilometers to walk in a broken spacesuit, and if you slow down and let the sun get ahead of you, and then run into one more teensy little problem, just one, you'll be dead, dead, dead, just like me. You wouldn't like it, trust me. Now get your pretty little lazy butt into gear and *move!"*

And, indeed, it was slow going. She couldn't bound down slopes as she used to, or the broken strut would fail and she'd have to stop for painstaking repair. There were no more level plains; it all seemed to be either boulder fields, crater walls, or mountains. On the eighteenth day she came to a huge natural arch. It towered over her head, and she gazed up at it in awe, wondering how such a structure could have been formed on the moon.

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"Not by wind, that's for sure," said Karen. "Lava, I'd figure. Melted through a ridge and flowed on, leaving the hole; then over the eons micrometeoroid bombardment ground off the rough edges. Pretty, though, isn't it?"

"Magnificent."

Not far past the arch she entered a forest of needle-thin crystals. At first they were small, breaking like glass under her feet, but then they soared above her, six-sided spires and minarets in fantastic colors. She picked her way in silence between them, bedazzled by the forest of light sparkling between the sapphire spires. The crystal jungle finally thinned out and was replaced by giant crystal boulders, glistening iridescent in the sun. Emeralds? Diamonds?

"I don't know, kid. But they're in our way. I'll be glad when they're behind us."

And after a while the glistening boulders thinned out as well, until there were only a scattered few glints of color on the slopes of the hills beside her, and then at last the rocks were just rocks, craggy and pitted.

Crater Daedalus, the middle of the lunar farside. There was no celebration this time. The sun had long ago stopped its lazy rise, and was imperceptibly dropping toward the horizon ahead of them.

"It's a race against the sun, kid, and the sun ain't making any stops to rest. You're losing ground."

"I'm tired. Can't you see I'm tired? I think I'm sick. I hurt all over. Get off my case. Let me rest. Just a few more minutes? Please?"

"You can rest when you're dead." Karen laughed in a strangled, high-pitched voice. Trish suddenly realized that she was on the edge of hysteria. Abruptly she stopped laughing. "Get a move on, kid. Move!"

The lunar surface passed under her, an irregular grey treadmill.

Hard work and good intentions couldn't disguise the fact that the sun was gaining. Every day when she woke up the sun was a little lower down ahead of her, shining a little more directly in her eyes.

Ahead of her, in the glare of the sun she could see an oasis, a tiny island of grass and trees in the lifeless desert. She could already hear the croaking of frogs: braap, braap, *BRAAP!*

No. That was no oasis; that was the sound of a malfunction alarm. She stopped, disoriented. Overheating. The suit air conditioning had broken down. It took her half a day to find the clogged coolant valve and another three hours soaked in sweat to find a way to unclog it without letting the precious liquid vent to space. The sun sank another handspan toward the horizon.

The sun was directly in her face now. Shadows of the rocks stretched toward her like hungry tentacles, even the smallest looking hungry and

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mean. Karen was walking beside her again, but now she was silent, sullen.

"Why won't you talk to me? Did I do something? Did I say something wrong? Tell me."

"I'm not here, little sister. I'm dead. I think it's about time you faced up to that."

"Don't say that. You can't be dead."

"You have an idealized picture of me in your mind. Let me go. *Let me go!*"

"I can't. Don't go. Hey—do you remember the time we saved up all our allowances for a year so we could buy a horse? And we found a stray kitten that was real sick, and we took the shoebox full of our allowance and the kitten to the vet, and he fixed the kitten but wouldn't take any money?"

"Yeah, I remember. But somehow we still never managed to save enough for a horse." Karen sighed. "Do you think it was easy growing up with a bratty little sister dogging my footsteps, trying to imitate everything I did?"

"I wasn't either bratty."

"You were too."

"No, I wasn't. I adored you." Did she? "I *worshipped* you."

"I know you did. Let me tell you, kid, that didn't make it any easier. Do you think it was easy being worshipped? Having to be a paragon all the time? Christ, all through high school, when I wanted to get high, I had to sneak away and do it in private, or else I knew my damn kid sister would be doing it too."

"You didn't. You never."

"Grow up, kid. Damn right I did. You were always right behind me. Everything I did, I knew you'd be right there doing it next. I had to struggle like hell to keep ahead of you, and you, damn you, followed effortlessly. You were smarter than me—you know that, don't you?—and how do you think that made me feel?"

"Well, what about me? Do you think it was easy for *me?* Growing up with a dead sister—everything I did, it was 'Too bad you can't be more like Karen' and 'Karen wouldn't have done it that way' and 'If only Karen had. . . .' How do you think that made *me* feel, huh? You had it easy—I was the one who had to live up to the standards of a goddamn *angel.*"

"Tough breaks, kid. Better than being dead."

"Damn it, Karen, I loved you. I love you. Why did you have to go away?"

"I know that, kid. I couldn't help it. I'm sorry. I love you too, but I have

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to go. Can you let me go? Can you just be yourself now, and stop trying to be me?"

"I'll . . . I'll try."

"Goodbye, little sister."

"Goodbye, Karen."

She was alone in the settling shadows on an empty, rugged plain. Ahead of her, the sun was barely kissing the ridgetops. The dust she kicked up was behaving strangely; rather than falling to the ground, it would hover half a meter off the ground. She puzzled over the effect, then saw that all around her, dust was silently rising off the ground. For a moment she thought it was another hallucination, but then realized it was some kind of electrostatic charging effect. She moved forward again through the rising fog of moondust. The sun reddened, and the sky turned a deep purple.

The darkness came at her like a demon. Behind her only the tips of mountains were illuminated, the bases disappearing into shadow. The ground ahead of her was covered with pools of ink that she had to pick her way around. Her radio locator was turned on, but receiving only static. It could only pick up the locator beacon from the *Moonshadow* if she got in line of sight of the crash site. She must be nearly there, but none of the landscape looked even slightly familiar. Ahead—was that the ridge she'd climbed to radio Earth? She couldn't tell. She climbed it, but didn't see the blue marble. The next one?

The darkness had spread up to her knees. She kept tripping over rocks invisible in the dark. Her footsteps struck sparks from the rocks, and behind her footprints glowed faintly. Triboluminescent glow, she thought—nobody has *ever* seen that before. She couldn't die now, not so close. But the darkness wouldn't wait. All around her the darkness lay like an unsuspected ocean, rocks sticking up out of the tidepools into the dying sunlight. The undervoltage alarm began to warble as the rising tide of darkness reached her solar array. The crash site had to be around here somewhere, it had to. Maybe the locator beacon was broken? She climbed up a ridge and into the light, looking around desperately for clues. Shouldn't there have been a rescue mission by now?

Only the mountaintops were in the light. She aimed for the nearest and tallest mountain she could see and made her way across the darkness to it, stumbling and crawling in the ocean of ink, at last pulling herself into the light like a swimmer gasping for air. She huddled on her rocky island, desperate as the tide of darkness slowly rose about her. Where were they? *Where were they?*

Back on Earth, work on the rescue mission had moved at a frantic

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pace. Everything was checked and triple-checked—in space, cutting corners was an invitation for sudden death—but still the rescue mission had been dogged by small problems and minor delays, delays that would have been routine for an ordinary mission, but loomed huge against the tight mission deadline.

The scheduling was almost impossibly tight—the mission had been set to launch in four months, not four weeks. Technicians scheduled for vacations volunteered to work overtime, while suppliers who normally took weeks to deliver parts delivered overnight. Final integration for the replacement for *Moonshadow,* originally to be called *Explorer* but now hastily re-christened *Rescuer,* was speeded up, and the transfer vehicle launched to the Space Station months ahead of the original schedule, less than two weeks after the *Moonshadow* crash. Two shuttle-loads of propellant swiftly followed, and the transfer vehicle was mated to its aeroshell and tested. While the rescue crew practiced possible scenarios on the simulator, the lander, with engines inspected and replaced, was hastily modified to accept a third person on ascent, tested, and then launched to rendezvous with *Rescuer.* Four weeks after the crash the stack was fueled and ready, the crew briefed, and the trajectory calculated. The crew shuttle launched through heavy fog to join their *Rescuer* in orbit.

Thirty days after the unexpected signal from the moon had revealed a survivor of the *Moonshadow* expedition, *Rescuer* left orbit for the moon.

From the top of the mountain ridge west of the crash site, Commander Stanley passed his searchlight over the wreckage one more time and shook his head in awe. "An amazing job of piloting," he said. "Looks like she used the TEI motor for braking, and then set it down on the RCS verniers."

"Incredible," Tanya Nakora murmured. "Too bad it couldn't save her."

The record of Patricia Mulligan's travels was written in the soil around the wreck. After the rescue team had searched the wreckage, they found the single line of footsteps that led due west, crossed the ridge, and disappeared over the horizon. Stanley put down the binoculars. There was no sign of returning footprints. "Looks like she wanted to see the moon before her air ran out," he said. Inside his helmet he shook his head slowly. "Wonder how far she got?"

"Could she be alive somehow?" asked Nakora. "She was a pretty ingenious kid."

"Not ingenious enough to breathe vacuum. Don't fool yourself—this rescue mission was a political toy from the start. We never had a chance of finding anybody up here still alive."

"Still, we had to try, didn't we?"

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Stanley shook his head and tapped his helmet. "Hold on a sec, my damn radio's acting up. I'm picking up some kind of feedback—almost sounds like a voice."

"I hear it too, Commander. But it doesn't make any sense."

The voice was faint in the radio. "Don't turn off the lights. Please, please, don't turn off your light. . . ."

Stanley turned to Nakora. "Do you. . . ?"

"I hear it, Commander . . . but I don't believe it."

Stanley picked up the searchlight and began sweeping the horizon. "Hello? *Rescuer* calling Astronaut Patricia Mulligan. Where the hell are you?"

The spacesuit had once been pristine white. It was now dirty grey with moondust, only the ragged and bent solar array on the back carefully polished free of debris. The figure in it was nearly as ragged.

After a meal and a wash, she was coherent and ready to explain.

"It was the mountaintop. I climbed the mountaintop to stay in the sunlight, and I just barely got high enough to hear your radios."

Nakora nodded. "That much we figured out. But the rest—the last month—you really walked all the way around the moon? Eleven thousand kilometers?"

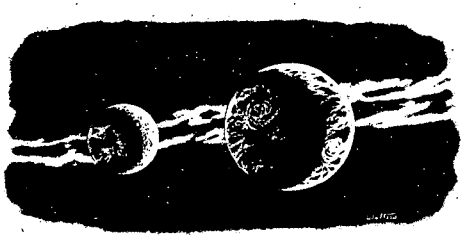
Trish nodded. "It was all I could think of. I figured, about the distance from New York to LA and back—people have walked that and lived. It came to a walking speed of just under ten miles an hour. Farside was the hard part—turned out to be much rougher than nearside. But strange and weirdly beautiful, in places. You wouldn't believe the things I saw."

She shook her head, and laughed quietly. "*I* don't believe some of the things I saw. The immensity of it—we've barely scratched the surface. I'll be coming back, Commander. I promise you."

"I'm sure you will," said Commander Stanley. "I'm sure you will."

As the ship lifted off the moon, Trish looked out for a last view of the surface. For a moment she thought she saw a lonely figure standing on the surface, waving her goodbye. She didn't wave back.

She looked again, and there was nothing out there but magnificent desolation.●



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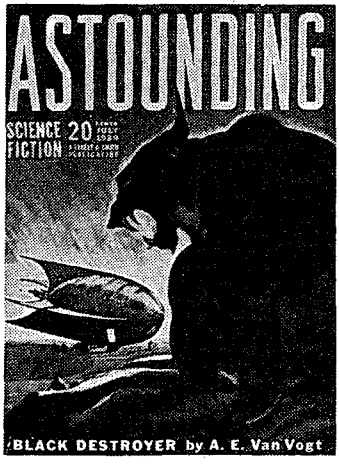

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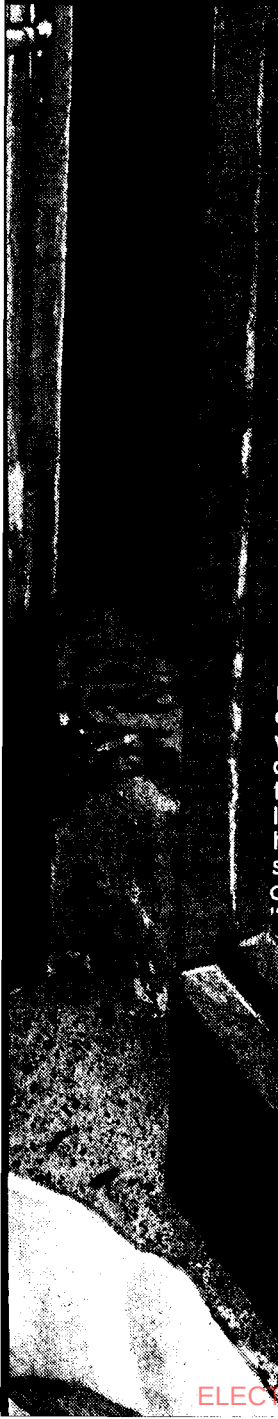

JACK

Connie Willis

Connie Willis's major new novel, *Doomsday Book*, will be released in hardcover by Bantam next year. Now that she's finished working on that book, Ms. Willis has found the time to write a few stories for us. We have at least one tale in inventory and we are expecting to see more of her work soon. In "Jack," her latest story, she uncovers new terrors and heartbreak in the London of the Blitz that she first visited in her masterful Hugo- and Nebula-award-winning novella "Firewatch" (*IAsfm*, February 1982).

art: Laura Lakey

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The night Jack joined our post, Vi was late. So was the Luftwaffe. The sirens still hadn't gone by eight o'clock.

"Perhaps our Violet's tired of the RAF and begun on the aircraft spotters," Morris said, "and they're so taken by her charms they've forgotten to wind the sirens."

"You'd best watch out then," Swales said, taking off his tin warden's hat. He'd just come back from patrol. We made room for him at the linoleum-covered table, moving our tea cups and the litter of gas masks and pocket torches. Twickenham shuffled his papers into one pile next to his typewriter and went on typing.

Swales sat down and poured himself a cup of tea. "She'll set her cap for the ARP next," he said, reaching for the milk. Morris pushed it toward him. "And none of us will be safe." He grinned at me. "Especially the young ones, Jack."

"I'm safe," I said. "I'm being called up soon. Twickenham's the one who should be worrying."

Twickenham looked up from his typing at the sound of his name. "Worrying about what?" he asked, his hands poised over the keyboard.

"Our Violet setting her cap for you," Swales said. "Girls always go for poets."

"I'm a journalist, not a poet. What about Renfrew?" He nodded his head toward the cots in the other room.

"Renfrew!" Swales boomed, pushing his chair back and starting into the room.

"Shh," I said. "Don't wake him. He hasn't slept all week."

"You're right. It wouldn't be fair in his weakened condition." He sat back down. "And Morris is married. What about your son, Morris? He's a pilot, isn't he? Stationed in London?"

Morris shook his head. "Quincy's up at North Weald."

"Lucky, that," Swales said. "Looks as if that leaves you, Twickenham."

"Sorry," Twickenham said, typing. "She's not my type."

"She's not anyone's type, is she?" Swales said.

"The RAF's," Morris said, and we all fell silent, thinking of Vi and her bewildering popularity with the RAF pilots in and around London. She had pale eyelashes and colorless brown hair she put up in flat little pincurls while she was on duty, which was against regulations, though Mrs. Lucy didn't say anything to her about them. Vi was dumpy and rather stupid, and yet she was out constantly with one pilot after another, going to dances and parties.

"I still say she makes it all up," Swales said. "She buys all those things she says they give her herself, all those oranges and chocolate. She buys them on the black market."

"On a full-time's salary?" I said. We only made two pounds a week, and the things she brought home to the post—sweets and sherry and cigarettes—couldn't be bought on that. Vi shared them round freely, though liquor and cigarettes were against regulations as well. Mrs. Lucy didn't say anything about them either.

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She never reprimanded her wardens about anything, except being malicious about Vi, and we never gossiped in her presence. I wondered where she was. I hadn't seen her since I came in.

"Where's Mrs. Lucy?" I asked. "She's not late as well, is she?"

Morris nodded toward the pantry door. "She's in her office. Olmwood's replacement is here. She's filling him in."

Olmwood had been our best part-time, a huge out-of-work collier who could lift a house beam by himself, which was why Nelson, using his authority as district warden, had had him transferred to his own post.

"I hope the new man's not any good," Swales said. "Or Nelson will steal *him*."

"I saw Olmwood yesterday," Morris said. "He looked like Renfrew, only worse. He told me Nelson keeps them out the whole night patrolling and looking for incendiaries."

There was no point in that. You couldn't see where the incendiaries were falling from the street, and if there was an incident, nobody was anywhere to be found. Mrs. Lucy had assigned patrols at the beginning of the Blitz, but within a week she'd stopped them at midnight so we could get some sleep. Mrs. Lucy said she saw no point in our getting killed when everyone was already in bed anyway.

"Olmwood says Nelson makes them wear their gas masks the entire time they're on duty and holds stirrup pump drills twice a shift," Morris said.

"Stirrup pump drills!" Swales exploded. "How difficult does he think it is to learn to use one? Nelson's not getting me on his post, I don't care if Churchill himself signs the transfer papers."

The pantry door opened. Mrs. Lucy poked her head out. "It's half-past eight. The spotter'd better go upstairs even if the sirens haven't gone," she said. "Who's on duty tonight?"

"Vi," I said, "but she hasn't come in yet."

"Oh, dear," she said. "Perhaps someone had better go look for her."

"I'll go," I said, and started pulling on my boots.

"Thank you, Jack," she said. She shut the door.

I stood up and tucked my pocket torch into my belt. I picked up my gas mask and slung it over my arm in case I ran into Nelson. The regulations said they were to be worn while patrolling, but Mrs. Lucy had realized early on that you couldn't see anything with them on. Which is why, I thought, she has the best post in the district, including Admiral Nelson's.

Mrs. Lucy opened the door again and leaned out for a moment. "She usually comes by underground. Sloane Square," she said. "Take care."

"Right," Swales said. "Vi might be lurking outside in the dark, waiting to pounce!" He grabbed Twickenham round the neck and hugged him to his chest.

"I'll be careful," I said and went up the basement stairs and out onto the street.

I went the way Vi usually came from Sloane Square Station, but there

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was no one in the blacked-out streets except a girl hurrying to the underground station, carrying a blanket, a pillow, and a dress on a hanger.

I walked the rest of the way to the tube station with her to make sure she found her way, though it wasn't that dark. The nearly full moon was up, and there was a fire still burning down by the docks from the raid of the night before.

"Thanks awfully," the girl said, switching the hanger to her other hand so she could shake hands with me. She was much nicer-looking than Vi, with blonde, very curly hair. "I work for this old stewpot at John Lewis's, and she won't let me leave even a minute before closing, will she, even if the sirens have gone."

I waited outside the station for a few minutes and then walked up to the Brompton Road, thinking Vi might have come in at South Kensington instead, but I didn't see her, and she still wasn't at the post when I got back.

"We've a new theory for why the sirens haven't gone," Swales said. "We've decided our Vi's set her cap for the Luftwaffe, and they've surrendered."

"Where's Mrs. Lucy?" I asked.

"Still in with the new man," Twickenham said.

"I'd better tell Mrs. Lucy I couldn't find her," I said and started for the pantry.

Halfway there the door opened, and Mrs. Lucy and the new man came out. He was scarcely a replacement for the burly Olmwood. He was not much older than I was, slightly built, hardly the sort to lift housebeams. His face was thin and rather pale, and I wondered if he was a student.

"This is our new part-time, Mr. Settle," Mrs. Lucy said. She pointed to each of us in turn. "Mr. Morris, Mr. Twickenham, Mr. Swales, Mr. Harker." She smiled at the part-time and then at me. "Mr. Harker's name is Jack, too," she said. "I shall have to work at keeping you straight."

"A pair of jacks," Swales said. "Not a bad hand."

The part-time smiled.

"Cots are in there if you'd like to have a lie-down," Mrs. Lucy said, "and if the raids are close, the coal cellar's reinforced. I'm afraid the rest of the basement isn't, but I'm attempting to rectify that." She waved the papers in her hand. "I've applied to the district warden for reinforcing beams. Gas-masks are in there," she said, pointing at a wooden chest, "batteries for the torches are in here," she pulled a drawer open, "and the duty roster's posted on this wall." She pointed at the neat columns. "Patrols here and watches here. As you can see, Miss Westen has the first watch for tonight."

"She's still not here," Twickenham said, not even pausing in his typing.

"I couldn't find her," I said.

"Oh, dear," she said. "I do hope she's all right. Mr. Twickenham, would you mind terribly taking Vi's watch?"

"I'll take it," Jack said. "Where do I go?"

"I'll show him," I said, starting for the stairs.

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"No, wait," Mrs. Lucy said. "Mr. Settle, I hate to put you to work before you've even had a chance to become acquainted with everyone, and there really isn't any need to go up till after the sirens have gone. Come and sit down, both of you." She took the flowered cozy off the teapot. "Would you like a cup of tea, Mr. Settle?"

"No, thank you," he said.

She put the cozy back on and smiled at him. "You're from Yorkshire, Mr. Settle," she said as if we were all at a tea party. "Whereabouts?"

"Newcastle," he said politely.

"What brings you to London?" Morris said.

"The war," he said, still politely.

"Wanted to do your bit, eh?"

"Yes."

"That's what my son Quincy said. 'Dad,' he says. 'I want to do my bit for England. I'm going to be a pilot.' Downed fifteen planes, he has, my Quincy," Morris told Jack, "and been shot down twice himself. Oh, he's had some scrapes, I could tell you, but it's all top-secret."

Jack nodded.

There were times I wondered whether Morris, like Violet with her RAF pilots, had invented his son's exploits. Sometimes I even wondered if he had invented the son, though if that were the case he might surely have made up a better name than Quincy.

" 'Dad,' he says to me out of the blue, 'I've got to do my bit,' and he shows me his enlistment papers. You could've knocked me over with a feather. Not that he's not patriotic, you understand, but he'd had his little difficulties at school, sowed his wild oats, so to speak, and here he was, saying, 'Dad, I want to do my bit.' "

The sirens went, taking up one after the other. Mrs. Lucy said, "Ah, well, here they are now," as if the last guest had finally arrived at her tea party, and Jack stood up.

"If you'll just show me where the spotter's post is, Mr. Harker," he said.

"Jack," I said. "It's a name that should be easy for you to remember."

I took him upstairs to what had been Mrs. Lucy's cook's garret bedroom, unlike the street a perfect place to watch for incendiaries. It was on the fourth floor, higher than most of the buildings on the street so one could see anything that fell on the roofs around. One could see the Thames, too, between the chimneypots, and in the other direction the searchlights in Hyde Park.

Mrs. Lucy had set a wing-backed chair by the window, from which the glass had been removed, and the narrow landing at the head of the stairs had been reinforced with heavy oak beams that even Olmwood couldn't have lifted.

"One ducks out here when the bombs get close," I said, shining the torch on the beams. "It'll be a swish and then a sort of rising whine." I led him into the bedroom. "If you see incendiaries, call out and try to mark exactly where they fall on the roofs." I showed him how to use the

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gunsight mounted on a wooden base that we used for a sextant and handed him the binoculars. "Anything else you need?" I asked.

"No," he said soberly. "Thank you."

I left him and went back downstairs. They were still discussing Violet.

"I'm really becoming worried about her," Mrs. Lucy said. One of the ack-ack guns started up, and there was the dull crump of bombs far away, and we all stopped to listen.

"ME 109's," Morris said. "They're coming in from the south again."

"I do hope she has the sense to get to a shelter." Mrs. Lucy said, and Vi burst in the door.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, setting a box tied with string on the table next to Twickenham's typewriter. She was out of breath and her face was suffused with blood. "I know I'm supposed to be on watch, but Harry took me out to see his plane this afternoon, and I had a horrid time getting back." She heaved herself out of her coat and hung it over the back of Jack's chair. "You'll never believe what he's named it! The Sweet Violet!" She untied the string on the box. "We were so late we hadn't time for tea, and he said, 'You take this to your post and have a good tea, and I'll keep the jerries busy till you've finished.' " She reached in the box and lifted out a torte with sugar icing. "He's painted the name on the nose and put little violets in purple all round it," she said, setting it on the table. "One for every jerry he's shot down."

We stared at the cake. Eggs and sugar had been rationed since the beginning of the year and they'd been in short supply even before that. I hadn't seen a fancy torte like this in over a year.

"It's raspberry filling," she said, slicing through the cake with a knife. "They hadn't any chocolate." She held the knife up, dripping jam. "Now, who wants some then?"

"I do," I said. I had been hungry since the beginning of the war and ravenous since I'd joined the ARP, especially for sweets, and I had my piece eaten before she'd finished setting slices on Mrs. Lucy's Wedgwood plates and passing them round.

There was still a quarter left. "Who's upstairs taking my watch?" she said, sucking a bit of raspberry jam off her finger.

"The new part-time," I said. "I'll take it up to him."

She cut a slice and eased it off the knife and onto the plate. "What's he like?" she asked.

"He's from Yorkshire," Twickenham said, looking at Mrs. Lucy. "What did he do up there before the war?"

Mrs. Lucy looked at her cake, as if surprised that it was nearly eaten. "He didn't say," she said.

"I meant, is he handsome?" Vi said, putting a fork on the plate with the slice of cake. "Perhaps I should take it up to him myself."

"He's puny. Pale," Swales said, his mouth full of cake. "Looks as if he's got consumption."

"Nelson won't steal him any time soon, that's certain," Morris said.

"Oh, well, then," Vi said, and handed the plate to me.

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I took it and went upstairs, stopping on the second floor landing to shift it to my left hand and switch on my pocket torch.

Jack was standing by the window, the binoculars dangling from his neck, looking out past the rooftops toward the river. The moon was up, reflecting whitely off the water like one of the German flares, lighting the bombers' way.

"Anything in our sector yet?" I said.

"No," he said, without turning round. "They're still to the east."

"I've brought you some raspberry cake," I said.

He turned and looked at me.

I held the cake out. "Violet's young man in the RAF sent it."

"No, thank you," he said. "I'm not fond of cake."

I looked at him with the same disbelief I had felt for Violet's name emblazoned on a Spitfire. "There's plenty," I said. "She brought a whole torte."

"I'm not hungry, thanks. You eat it."

"Are you sure? One can't get this sort of thing these days."

"I'm certain," he said and turned back to the window.

I looked hesitantly at the slice of cake, guilty about my greed but hating to see it go to waste, and still hungry. At the least I should stay up and keep him company.

"Violet's the warden whose watch you took, the one who was late," I said. I sat down on the floor, my back to the painted baseboard, and started to eat. "She's full-time. We've got five full-timers. Violet and I and Renfrew—you haven't met him yet, he was asleep. He's had rather a bad time. Can't sleep in the day—and Morris and Twickenham. And then there's Petersby. He's part-time like you."

He didn't turn around while I was talking or say anything, only continued looking out the window. A scattering of flares drifted down, lighting the room.

"They're a nice lot," I said, cutting a bite of cake with my fork. In the odd light from the flares the jam filling looked black. "Swales can be rather a nuisance with his teasing sometimes, and Twickenham will ask you all sorts of questions, but they're good men on an incident."

He turned around. "Questions?"

"For the post newspaper. Notice sheet, really, information on new sorts of bombs, ARP regulations, that sort of thing. All Twickenham's supposed to do is type it and send it round to the other posts, but I think he's always fancied himself an author, and now he's got his chance. He's named the notice sheet *Twickenham's Twitterings*, and he adds all sorts of things—drawings, news, gossip, interviews."

While I had been talking, the drone of engines overhead had been growing steadily louder. It passed, there was a sighing whoosh and then a whistle that turned into a whine.

"Stairs," I said, dropping my plate. I grabbed his arm, and yanked him into the shelter of the landing. We crouched against the blast, my hands over my head, but nothing happened. The whine became a scream and

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then sounded suddenly farther off. I peeked round the reinforcing beam at the open window. Light flashed and then the crump came, at least three sectors away. "Lees," I said, going over to the window to see if I could tell exactly where it was. "High explosive bomb." Jack focused the binoculars where I was pointing.

I went out to the landing, cupped my hands, and shouted down the stairs, "HE. Lees." The planes were still too close to bother sitting down again. "Twickenham's done interviews with all the wardens," I said, leaning against the wall. "He'll want to know what you did before the war, why you became a warden, that sort of thing. He wrote up a piece on Vi last week."

Jack had lowered the binoculars and was watching where I had pointed. The fires didn't start right away with a high explosive bomb. It took a bit for the ruptured gas mains and scattered coal fires to catch. "What was she before the war?" he asked.

"Vi? A stenographer," I said. "And something of a wallflower, I should think. The war's been rather a blessing for our Vi."

"A blessing," Jack said, looking out at the high explosive in Lees. From where I was sitting, I couldn't see his face except in silhouette, and I couldn't tell whether he disapproved of the word or was merely bemused by it.

"I didn't mean a blessing exactly. One can scarcely call something as dreadful as this a blessing. But the war's given Vi a chance she wouldn't have had otherwise. Morris says without it she'd have died an old maid; and now she's got all sorts of beaux." A flare drifted down, white and then red. "Morris says the war's the best thing that ever happened to her."

"Morris," he said, as if he didn't know which one that was.

"Sandy hair, toothbrush mustache," I said. "His son's a pilot."

"Doing his bit," he said, and I could see his face clearly in the reddish light, but I still couldn't read his expression.

A stick of incendiaries came down over the river, glittering like sparklers, and fires sprang up everywhere.

The next night there was a bad incident off Old Church Street, two HE's. Mrs. Lucy sent Jack and me over to see if we could help. It was completely overcast, which was supposed to stop the Luftwaffe but obviously hadn't, and very dark. By the time we reached Kings Road I had completely lost my bearings.

I knew the incident had to be close, though, because I could smell it. It wasn't truly a smell; it was a painful sharpness in the nose from the plaster dust and smoke and whatever explosive the Germans put in their bombs. It always made Vi sneeze.

I tried to make out landmarks, but all I could see was the slightly darker outline of a hill on my left. I thought blankly, "We must be lost. There aren't any hills in Chelsea," and then realized it must be the incident.

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"The first thing we do is find the incident officer," I told Jack. I looked round for the officer's blue light, but I couldn't see it. It must be behind the hill.

I scrabbled up it with Jack behind me, trying not to slip on the uncertain slope. The light was on the far side of another, lower hill, a ghostly bluish blur off to the left. "It's over there," I said. "We must report in. Nelson's likely to be the incident officer, and he's a stickler for procedure."

I started down, skidding on the broken bricks and plaster. "Be careful," I called back to Jack. "There are all sorts of jagged pieces of wood and glass."

"Jack," he said.

I turned around. He had stopped halfway down the hill and was looking up, as if he had heard something. I glanced up, afraid the bombers were coming back, but couldn't hear anything over the antiaircraft guns. Jack stood motionless, his head down now, looking at the rubble.

"What is it?" I said.

He didn't answer. He snatched his torch out of his pocket and swung it wildly round.

"You can't do that!" I shouted. "There's a blackout on!"

He snapped it off. "Go and find something to dig with," he said and dropped to his knees. "There's someone alive under here."

He wrenched the bannister free and began stabbing into the rubble with its broken end.

I looked stupidly at him. "How do you know?"

He jabbed viciously at the mess. "Get a pickaxe. This stuff's hard as rock." He looked up at me impatiently. "Hurry!"

The incident officer was someone I didn't know. I was glad. Nelson would have refused to give me a pickaxe without the necessary authorization and lectured me instead on departmentalization of duties. This officer, who was younger than me and broken out in spots under his powdering of brick dust, didn't have a pickaxe, but he gave me two shovels without any argument.

The dust and smoke were clearing a bit by the time I started back across the mounds, and a shower of flares drifted down over by the river, lighting everything in a fuzzy, overbright light like headlights in a fog. I could see Jack on his hands and knees halfway down the mound, stabbing with the bannister. He looked like he was murdering someone with a knife, plunging it in again and again.

Another shower of flares came down, much closer. I ducked and hurried across to Jack, offering him one of the shovels.

"That's no good," he said, waving it away.

"What's wrong? Can't you hear the voice anymore?"

He went on jabbing with the bannister. "What?" he said, and looked in the flare's dazzling light like he had no idea what I was talking about.

"The voice you heard," I said. "Has it stopped calling?"

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"It's this stuff," he said. "There's no way to get a shovel into it. Did you bring any baskets?"

I hadn't, but farther down the mound I had seen a large tin saucepan. I fetched it for him and began digging. He was right, of course. I got one good shovelful and then struck an end of a floor-joist and bent the blade of the shovel. I tried to get it under the joist so I could pry it upward, but it was wedged under a large section of beam farther on. I gave it up, broke off another of the bannisters, and got down beside Jack.

The beam was not the only thing holding the joist down. The rubble looked loose—bricks and chunks of plaster and pieces of wood—but it was as solid as cement. Swales, who showed up out of nowhere when we were three feet down, said, "It's the clay. All London's built on it. Hard as statues." He had brought two buckets with him and the news that Nelson had shown up and had had a fight with the spotty officer over whose incident it was.

" 'It's *my* incident,' Nelson says, and gets out the map to show him how this side of King's Road is in his district," Swales said gleefully, "and the incident officer says, 'Your *incident?* Who wants the bloody thing, I say,' he says."

Even with Swales helping, the going was so slow whoever was under there would probably have suffocated or bled to death before we could get to him. Jack didn't stop at all, even when the bombs were directly overhead. He seemed to know exactly where he was going, though none of us heard anything in those brief intervals of silence and Jack seemed scarcely to listen.

The bannister he was using broke off in the iron-hard clay, and he took mine and kept digging. A broken clock came up, and an egg cup. Morris arrived. He had been evacuating people from two streets over where a bomb had buried itself in the middle of the street without exploding. Swales told him the story of Nelson and the spotty young officer and then went off to see what he could find out about the inhabitants of the house.

Jack came up out of the hole. "I need braces," he said. "The sides are collapsing."

I found some unbroken bed slats at the base of the mound. One of the slats was too long for the shaft. Jack sawed it halfway through and then broke it off.

Swales came back. "Nobody in the house," he shouted down the hole. "The Colonel and Mrs. Godalming went to Surrey this morning." The all-clear sounded, drowning out his words.

"Jack," Jack said from the hole, and I turned around to see if the rescue squad had brought the Jack down with them.

"Jack," he said again, more urgently.

I leaned over the tunnel.

"What time is it?" he said.

"About five," I said. "The all-clear just went."

"Is it getting light?"

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"Not yet," I said. "Have you found anything?"

"Yes," he said. "Give us a hand."

I eased myself into the hole. I could understand his question; it was pitch dark down here. I switched my torch on. It lit up our faces from beneath like spectres.

"In there," he said, and reached for a bannister just like the one he'd been digging with.

"Is he under a stairway?" I said and the bannister clutched at his hand.

It only took a minute or two to get him out. Jack pulled on the arm I had mistaken for a bannister, and I scrabbled through the last few inches of plaster and clay to the little cave he was in, formed by an icebox and a door leaning against each other.

"Colonel Godalming?' I said, reaching for him.

He shook off my hand. "Where the bleeding hell have you people been?" he said. "Taking a tea break?"

He was in full evening dress, and his big mustache was covered with plaster dust. "What sort of country is this, leave a man to dig himself out?" he shouted, brandishing a serving spoon full of plaster in Jack's face. "I could have dug all the way to China in the time it took you blighters to get me out!"

Hands came down into the hole and hoisted him up. "Blasted incompetents!" he yelled. We pushed on the seat of his elegant trousers. "Slackers, the lot of you! Couldn't find the nose in front of your own face!"

Colonel Godalming had in fact left for Surrey the day before but had decided to come back for his hunting rifle, in case of invasion. "Can't rely on the blasted Civil Defence to stop the jerries," he had said as I led him down to the ambulance.

It was starting to get light. The incident was smaller than I'd thought, not much more than two blocks square. What I had taken for a mound to the south was actually a squat office block, and beyond it the row houses hadn't even had their windows blown out.

The ambulance had pulled up as near as possible to the mound. I helped him over to it. "What's your name?" he said, ignoring the doors I'd opened. "I intend to report you to your superiors. And the other one. Practically pulled my arm out of its socket. Where's he got to?"

"He had to go to his day job," I said. As soon as we had Godalming out, Jack had switched on his pocket torch again to glance at his watch and said, "I've got to leave."

I told him I'd check him out with the incident officer and started to help Godalming down the mound. Now I was sorry I hadn't gone with him.

"Day job!" Godalming snorted. "Gone off to take a nap is more like it. Lazy slacker. Nearly breaks my arm and then goes off and leaves me to die. I'll have his job!"

"Without him, we'd never even have found you," I said angrily. "He's the one who heard your cries for help."

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"Cries for help!" the colonel said, going red in the face. "Cries for help! Why would I cry out to a lot of damned slackers!"

The ambulance driver got out of the car and came round to see what the delay was.

"Accused me of crying out like a damned coward!" he blustered to her. "I didn't make a sound. Knew it wouldn't do any good. Knew if I didn't dig myself out, I'd be there till Kingdom Come! Nearly had myself out, too, and then he comes along and accuses me of blubbering like a baby! It's monstrous, that's what it is! Monstrous!"

She took hold of his arm.

"What do you think you're doing, young woman? You should be at home instead of out running round in short skirts! It's indecent, that's what it is!"

She shoved him, still protesting, onto a bunk, and covered him up with a blanket. I slammed the doors to, watched her off, and then made a circuit of the incident, looking for Swales and Morris. The rising sun appeared between two bands of cloud, reddening the mounds and glinting off a broken mirror.

I couldn't find either of them, so I reported in to Nelson, who was talking angrily on a field telephone and who nodded and waved me off when I tried to tell him about Jack, and then went back to the post.

Swales was already regaling Morris and Vi, who were eating breakfast, with an imitation of Colonel Godalming. Mrs. Lucy was still filling out papers, apparently the same form as when we'd left.

"Huge mustaches," Swales was saying, his hands two feet apart to illustrate their size, "like a walrus's, and tails, if you please. 'Oi siy, this is disgriceful!' " he sputtered, his right eye squinted shut with an imaginary monocle, " 'Wot's the Impire coming to when a man cahn't even be rescued!' " He dropped into his natural voice. "I thought he was going to have our two Jacks court-martialed on the spot." He peered round me. "Where's Settle?"

"He had to go to his day job," I said.

"Just as well," he said, screwing the monocle back in. "The colonel looked like he was coming back with the Royal Lancers." He raised his arm, gripping an imaginary sword. "Charge!"

Vi tittered. Mrs. Lucy looked up and said, "Violet, make Jack some toast. Sit down, Jack. You look done in."

I took my helmet off and started to set it on the table. It was caked with plaster dust, so thick it was impossible to see the red W through it. I hung it on my chair and sat down.

Morris shoved a plate of kippers at me. "You never know what they're going to do when you get them out," he said. "Some of them fall all over you, sobbing, and some act like they're doing you a favor. I had one old woman acted all offended, claimed I made an improper advance when I was working her leg free."

Renfrew came in from the other room, wrapped in a blanket. He looked

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as bad as I thought I must, his face slack and gray with fatigue. "Where was the incident?" he asked anxiously.

"Just off Old Church Street. In Nelson's sector," I added to reassure him.

But he said nervously, "They're coming closer every night. Have you noticed that?"

"No, they aren't," Vi said. "We haven't had anything in our sector all week."

Renfrew ignored her. "First Gloucester Road and then Ixworth Place and now Old Church Street. It's as if they're circling, searching for something."

"London," Mrs. Lucy said briskly. "And if we don't enforce the blackout, they're likely to find it." She handed Morris a typed list. "Reported infractions from last night. Go round and reprimand them." She put her hand on Renfrew's shoulder. "Why don't you go have a nice lie-down, Mr. Renfrew, while I cook you breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry," he said, but he let her lead him, clutching his blanket, back to the cot.

We watched Mrs. Lucy spread the blanket over him and then lean down and tuck it in around his shoulders, and then Swales said, "You know who this Godalming fellow reminds me of? A lady we rescued over in Gower Street," he said, yawning. "Hauled her out and asked her if her husband was in there with her. 'No,' she says, 'the bleedin' coward's at the front.' "

We all laughed.

"People like this colonel person don't deserve to be rescued," Vi said, spreading oleo on a slice of toast. "You should have left him there awhile and seen how he liked that."

"He was lucky they didn't leave him there altogether," Morris said. "The register had him in Surrey with his wife."

"Lucky he had such a loud voice," Swales said. He twirled the end of an enormous mustache. "Oi siy," he boomed. "Get me out of here im-meejutly, you slackers!"

But he said he didn't call out, I thought, and could hear Jack shouting over the din of the antiaircraft guns, the drone of the planes, "There's someone under here."

Mrs. Lucy came back to the table. "I've applied for reinforcements for the post," she said, standing her papers on end and tamping them into an even stack. "Someone from the Town Hall will be coming to inspect in the next few days." She picked up two bottles of ale and an ashtray and carried them over to the dustbin.

"Applied for reinforcements?" Swales asked. "Why? Afraid Colonel Godalming'll be back with the heavy artillery?"

There was a loud banging on the door.

"Oi siy," Swales said. "Here he is now, and he's brought his hounds."

Mrs. Lucy opened the door. "Worse," Vi whispered, diving for the last

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bottle of ale. "It's Nelson." She passed the bottle to me under the table, and I passed it to Morris, who tucked it inside his coverall.

"Mr. Nelson," Mrs. Lucy said as if she were delighted to see him, "Do come in. And how are things over your way?"

"We took a beating last night," he said, glaring at us as though we were responsible.

"He's had a complaint from the Colonel," Swales whispered to me. "You're done for, mate."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that," Mrs. Lucy said. "Now, how may I help you?"

He pulled a folded paper from the pocket of his uniform and carefully opened it out. "This was forwarded to me from the City Engineer," he said. "All requests for material improvements are to be sent to the district warden, *not* over his head to the Town Hall."

"Oh, I'm so *glad*," Mrs. Lucy said, leading him into the pantry. "It is such a comfort to deal with someone one knows, rather than a faceless bureaucracy. If I had realized you were the proper person to appeal to, I should have contacted you *immediately*." She shut the door.

Morris took the ale bottle out from under his coverall and buried it in the dustbin. Violet began taking out her bobby pins.

"We'll never get our reinforcements now," Swales said. "Not with Adolf von Nelson in charge."

"Shh," Vi said, yanking at her snail-like curls. "You don't want him to hear you."

"Olmwood told me he makes them keep working at an incident, even when the bombs are right overhead. Thinks all the posts should do it."

"Shh!" Vi said.

"He's a bleeding Nazi!" Swales said, but he lowered his voice. "Got two of his wardens killed that way. You better not let him find out you and Jack are good at finding bodies or you'll be out there dodging shrapnel, too."

Good at finding bodies. I thought of Jack, standing motionless, looking at the rubble and saying, "There's someone alive under here. Hurry."

"That's why Nelson steals from the other posts," Vi said, scooping her bobby pins off the table and into her haversack. "Because he does his own in." She pulled out a comb and began yanking it through her snarled curls.

The pantry door opened and Nelson and Mrs. Lucy came out, Nelson still holding the unfolded paper. She was still wearing her tea-party smile, but it was a bit thin. "I'm sure you can see it's unrealistic to expect nine people to huddle in a coal cellar for hours at a time," she said.

"There are people all over London 'huddling in coal cellars for hours at a time,' as you put it," Nelson said coldly, "who do not wish their Civil Defence funds spent on frivolities."

"I do not consider the safety of my wardens a frivolity," she said, "though it is clear to me that you do, as witnessed by your very poor record."

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Nelson stared for a full minute at Mrs. Lucy, trying to think of a retort, and then turned on me. "Your uniform is a disgrace, warden," he said and stomped out.

Whatever it was Jack had used to find Colonel Godalming, it didn't work on incendiaries. He searched as haphazardly for them as the rest of us, Vi, who had been on spotter duty, shouting directions: "No, farther down Fulham Road. In the grocer's."

She had apparently been daydreaming about her pilots, instead of spotting. The incendiary was not in the grocer's but in the butcher's three doors down, and by the time Jack and I got to it, the meat locker was on fire. It wasn't hard to put out, there were no furniture or curtains to catch and the cold kept the wooden shelves from catching, but the butcher was extravagantly grateful. He insisted on wrapping up five pounds of lamb chops in white paper and thrusting them into Jack's arms.

"Did you really have to be at your day job so early or were you only trying to escape the colonel?" I asked Jack on the way back to the post.

"Was he that bad?" he said, handing me the parcel of lamb chops.

"He nearly took my head off when I said you'd heard him shouting. Said he didn't call for help. Said he was digging himself out." The white butcher's paper was so bright the Luftwaffe would think it was a searchlight. I tucked the parcel inside my overalls so it wouldn't show. "What sort of work is it, your day job?" I asked.

"War work," he said.

"Did they transfer you? Is that why you came to London?"

"No," he said. "I wanted to come." We turned into Mrs. Lucy's street. "Why did you join the ARP?"

"I'm waiting to be called up," I said, "so no one would hire me."

"And you wanted to do your bit."

"Yes," I said, wishing I could see his face.

"What about Mrs. Lucy? Why did she become a warden?"

"Mrs. Lucy?" I said blankly. The question had never even occurred to me. She was the best warden in London. It was her natural calling, and I'd thought of her as always having been one. "I've no idea," I said. "It's her house, she's a widow. Perhaps the Civil Defence commandeered it, and she had to become one. It's the tallest in the street." I tried to remember what Twickenham had written about her in his interview. "Before the war she was something to do with a church."

"A church," he said, and I wished again I could see his face. I couldn't tell in the dark whether he spoke in contempt or longing.

"She was a deaconess or something," I said. "What sort of war work is it? Munitions?"

"No," he said and walked on ahead.

Mrs. Lucy met us at the door of the post. I gave her the packages of lamb chops, and Jack went upstairs to replace Vi as spotter. Mrs. Lucy cooked the chops up immediately, running upstairs to the kitchen during

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a lull in the raids for salt and a jar of mint sauce, standing over the gas ring at the end of the table and turning them for what seemed an eternity. They smelled wonderful.

Twickenham passed around newly run-off copies of *Twickenham's Twitterings*. "Something for you to read while you wait for your dinner," he said proudly.

The lead article was about the change in address of Sub-Post D, which had taken a partial hit that broke the water mains.

"Had Nelson refused them reinforcements, too?" Swales asked.

"Listen to this," Petersby said. He read aloud from the newssheet. " 'The crime rate in London has risen 28 percent since the beginning of the blackout.' "

"And no wonder," Vi said, coming down from upstairs. "You can't see your nose in front of your face at night, let alone someone lurking in an alley. I'm always afraid someone's going to jump out at me while I'm on patrol."

"All those houses standing empty, and half of London sleeping in the shelters," Swales said. "It's easy pickings. If I was a bad'un, I'd come straight to London."

"It's disgusting," Morris said indignantly. "The idea of someone taking advantage of there being a war like that to commit crimes."

"Oh, Mr. Morris, that reminds me. Your son telephoned," Mrs. Lucy said, cutting into a chop to see if it was done. Blood welled up. "He said he'd a surprise for you, and you were to come out to—" She switched the fork to her left hand and rummaged in her overall pocket till she found a slip of paper, "—North Weald on Monday, I think. His commanding officer's made the necessary travel arrangements for you. I wrote it all down." She handed it to him and went back to turning the chops.

"A surprise?" Morris said, sounding worried. "He's not in trouble, is he? His commanding officer wants to see me?"

"I don't know. He didn't say what it was about. Only that he wanted you to come."

Vi went over to Mrs. Lucy and peered into the skillet. "I'm glad it was the butcher's and not the grocer's," she said. "Rutabagas wouldn't have cooked up half so nice."

Mrs. Lucy speared a chop, put it on a plate, and handed it to Vi. "Take this up to Jack," she said.

"He doesn't want any," Vi said. She took the plate and sat down at the table.

"Did he say why he didn't?" I asked.

She looked curiously at me. "I suppose he's not hungry," she said. "Or perhaps he doesn't like lamb chops."

"I do hope he's not in any trouble," Morris said, and it took me a minute to realize he was talking about his son. "He's not a bad boy, but he does things without thinking. Youthful high spirits, that's all it is."

"He didn't eat the cake either," I said. "Did he say why he didn't want the lamb chop?"

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"If Mr. Settle doesn't want it, then take it to Mr. Renfrew," Mrs. Lucy said sharply. She snatched the plate away from Vi. "And don't let him tell you he's not hungry. He must eat. He's getting very run-down."

Vi sighed and stood up. Mrs. Lucy handed her back the plate and she went into the other room.

"We all need to eat plenty of good food and get lots of sleep," Mrs. Lucy said reprovingly. "To keep our strength up."

"I've written an article about it in the *Twitterings*," Twickenham said, beaming. "It's known as 'walking death.' It's brought about by lack of sleep and poor nutrition, with the anxiety of the raids. The walking dead exhibit slowed reaction time and impaired judgment which result in increased accidents on the job."

"Well, I won't have any walking dead among *my* wardens," Mrs. Lucy said, dishing up the rest of the chops. "As soon as you've had these, I want you all to go to bed."

The chops tasted even better than they had smelled. I ate mine, reading Twickenham's article on the walking dead. It said that loss of appetite was a common reaction to the raids. It also said that lack of sleep could cause compulsive behavior and odd fixations. "The walking dead may become convinced that they are being poisoned or that a friend or relative is a German agent. They may hallucinate, hearing voices, seeing visions or believing fantastical things."

"He was in trouble at school, before the war, but he's steadied down since he joined up," Morris said. "I wonder what he's done."

At three the next morning a land mine exploded in almost the same spot off Old Church Street as the HE's. Nelson sent Olmwood to ask for help, and Mrs. Lucy ordered Swales, Jack, and me to go with him.

"The mine didn't land more'n two houses away from the first crater," Olmwood said while we were getting on our gear. "The jerries couldn't have come closer if they'd been aiming at it."

"I know what they're aiming at," Renfrew said from the doorway. He looked terrible, pale and drawn as a ghost. "And I know why you've applied for reinforcements for the post. It's me, isn't it? They're after me."

"They're not after any of us," Mrs. Lucy said firmly. "They're two miles up. They're not aiming at anything."

"Why would Hitler want to bomb you more than the rest of us?" Swales said.

"I don't know." He sank down on one of the chairs and put his head in his hands. "I don't *know*. But they're after me. I can feel it."

Mrs. Lucy had sent Swales, Jack, and me to the incident because "you've been there before. You'll know the terrain," but that was a fond hope. Since they explode above ground, land mines do considerably more damage than HE's. There was now a hill where the incident officer's tent had been, and three more beyond it, a mountain range in the middle of

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London. Swales started up the nearest peak to look for the incident officer's light.

"Jack, over here!" somebody called from the hill behind us, and both of us scrambled up a slope toward the voice.

A group of five men were halfway up the hill looking down into a hole.

"Jack!" the man yelled again. He was wearing a blue foreman's armband, and he was looking straight past us at someone toiling up the slope with what looked like a stirrup pump. I thought, surely they're not trying to fight a fire down that shaft, and then saw it wasn't a pump. It was, in fact, an automobile jack, and the man with the blue armband reached between us for it, lowered it down the hole, and scrambled in after it.

The rest of the rescue squad stood looking down into the blackness as if they could actually see something. After awhile they began handing empty buckets down into the hole and pulling them out heaped full of broken bricks and pieces of splintered wood. None of them took any notice of us, even when Jack held out his hands to take one of the buckets.

"We're from Chelsea," I shouted to the foreman over the din of the planes and bombs. "What can we do to help?"

They went on bucket-brigading. A china teapot came up on the top of one load, covered with dust but not even chipped.

I tried again. "Who is it down there?"

"Two of 'em," the man nearest me said. He plucked the teapot off the heap and handed it to a man wearing a balaclava under his helmet. "Man and a woman."

"We're from Chelsea," I shouted over a burst of antiaircraft fire. "What do you want us to do?"

He took the teapot away from the man with the balaclava and handed it to me. "Take this down to the pavement with the other valuables."

It took me a long while to get down the slope, holding the teapot in one hand and the lid on with the other and trying to keep my footing among the broken bricks, and even longer to find any pavement. The land mine had heaved most of it up, and the street with it.

I finally found it, a square of unbroken pavement in front of a blown-out bakery, with the "valuables" neatly lined up against it: a radio, a boot, two serving spoons like the one Colonel Godalming had threatened me with, a lady's beaded evening bag. A rescue worker was standing guard next to them.

"Halt!" he said, stepping in front of them as I came up, holding a pocket torch or a gun. "No one's allowed inside the incident perimeter."

"I'm ARP," I said hastily. "Jack Harker. Chelsea." I held up the teapot. "They sent me down with this."

It was a torch. He flicked it on and off, an eyeblink. "Sorry," he said. "We've had a good deal of looting recently." He took the teapot and placed it at the end of the line next to the evening bag. "Caught a man last week going through the pockets of the bodies laid out in the street waiting for the mortuary van. Terrible how some people will take advantage of something like this."

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I went back up to where the rescue workers were digging. Jack was at the mouth of the shaft, hauling buckets up and handing them back. I got in line behind him.

"Have they found them yet?" I asked him as soon as there was a lull in the bombing.

"Quiet!" a voice shouted from the hole, and the man in the balaclava repeated, "Quiet, everyone! We must have absolute quiet!"

Everyone stopped working and listened. Jack had handed me a bucket full of bricks, and the handle cut into my hands. For a second there was absolute silence, and then the drone of a plane and the distant swish and crump of an HE.

"Don't worry," the voice from the hole shouted, "we're nearly there." The buckets began coming up out of the hole again.

I hadn't heard anything, but apparently down in the shaft they had, a voice or the sound of tapping, and I felt relieved, both that one of them at least was still alive, and that the diggers were on course. I'd been on an incident in October where we'd had to stop halfway down and sink a new shaft because the rubble kept distorting and displacing the sound. Even if the shaft was directly above the victim, it tended to go crooked in working past obstacles, and the only way to keep it straight was with frequent soundings. I thought of Jack digging for Colonel Godalming with the bannister. He hadn't taken any soundings at all. He had seemed to know exactly where he was going.

The men in the shaft called for the jack again, and Jack and I lowered it down to them. As the man below it reached up to take it, Jack stopped. He raised his head, as if he were listening.

"What is it?" I said. I couldn't hear anything but the ack-ack guns in Hyde Park. "Did you hear someone calling?"

"Where's the bloody jack?" the foreman shouted.

"It's too late," Jack said to me. "They're dead."

"Come along, get it down here," the foreman shouted. "We haven't got all day."

He handed the jack down.

"Quiet," the foreman shouted, and above us, like a ghostly echo, we could hear the balaclava call, "Quiet, please everyone."

A church clock began to chime and I could hear the balaclava say irritatedly, "We must have absolute quiet."

The clock chimed four and stopped, and there was a skittering sound of dirt falling on metal. Then silence, and a faint sound.

"Quiet!" the foreman called again, and there was another silence, and the sound again. A whimper. Or a moan. "We hear you," he shouted. "Don't be afraid."

"One of them's still alive," I said.

Jack didn't say anything.

"We just *heard* them," I said angrily.

Jack shook his head.

"We'll need lumber for bracing," the man in the balaclava said to Jack,

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and I expected him to tell him it was no use, but he went off immediately and came back dragging a white-painted bookcase.

It still had three books in it. I helped Jack and the balaclava knock the shelves out of the case and then took the books down to the store of "valuables." The guard was sitting on the pavement going through the beaded evening bag.

"Taking inventory," he said, scrambling up hastily. He jammed a lipstick and a handkerchief into the bag. "So's to make certain nothing gets stolen."

"I've brought you something to read," I said, and laid the books next to the teapot. "*Crime and Punishment.*"

I toiled back up the hill and helped Jack lower the bookshelves down the shaft and after a few minutes buckets began coming up again. We reformed our scraggly bucket brigade, the balaclava at the head of it and me and then Jack at its end.

The all-clear went. As soon as it wound down, the foreman took another sounding. This time we didn't hear anything, and when the buckets started again I handed them to Jack without looking at him.

It began to get light in the east, a slow graying of the hills above us. Two of them, several stories high, stood where the row houses that had escaped the night before had been, and we were still in their shadow, though I could see the shaft now, with the end of one of the white bookshelves sticking up from it like a gravestone.

The buckets began to come more slowly.

"Put out your cigarettes!" the foreman called up, and we all stopped, trying to catch the smell of gas. If they were dead, as Jack had said, it was most likely gas leaking in from the broken mains that had killed them, and not internal injuries. The week before we had brought up a boy and his dog, not a scratch on them. The dog had barked and whimpered almost up to when we found them, and the ambulance driver said she thought they'd only been dead a few minutes.

I couldn't smell any gas and after a minute the foreman said excitedly, "I see them!"

The balaclava leaned over the shaft, his hands on his knees. "Are they alive?"

"Yes! Fetch an ambulance!"

The balaclava went leaping down the hill, skidding on broken bricks that skittered down in a minor avalanche.

I knelt over the shaft. "Will they need a stretcher?" I called down.

"No," the foreman said, and I knew by the sound of his voice they were dead.

"Both of them?" I said.

"Yes."

I stood up. "How did you know they were dead?" I said, turning to look at Jack. "How did—"

He wasn't there. I looked down the hill. The balaclava was nearly to the bottom—grabbing at a broken window sash to stop his headlong

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descent, his wake a smoky cloud of brick dust—but Jack was nowhere to be seen.

It was nearly dawn. I could see the gray hills and at the far end of them the warden and his "valuables." There was another rescue party on the third hill over, still digging. I could see Swales handing down a bucket.

"Give a hand here," the foreman said impatiently and hoisted the jack up to me. I hauled it over to the side and then came back and helped the foreman out of the shaft. His hands were filthy, covered in reddish-brown mud.

"Was it the gas that killed them?" I asked, even though he was already pulling out a packet of cigarettes.

"No," he said, shaking a cigarette out and taking it between his teeth. He patted the front of his coverall, leaving red stains.

"How long have they been dead?" I asked.

He found his matches, struck one, and lit the cigarette. "Shortly after we last heard them, I should say," he said, and I thought, but they were already dead by then. And Jack knew it. "They've been dead at least two hours."

I looked at my watch. I read a little past six. "But the mine didn't kill them?"

He took the cigarette between his fingers and blew a long puff of smoke. When he put the cigarette back in his mouth there was a red smear on it. "Loss of blood."

The next night the Luftwaffe was early. I hadn't gotten much sleep after the incident. Morris had fretted about his son the whole day and Swales had teased Renfrew mercilessly. "Goering's found out about your spying," he said, "And now he's sent his Stukas after you."

I finally went up to the third floor and tried to sleep in the spotter's chair, but it was too light. The afternoon was cloudy, and the fires burning in the East End gave the sky a nasty reddish cast.

Someone had left a copy of *Twickenham's Twitterings* on the floor. I read the article on the walking dead again, and then, still unable to sleep, the rest of the newssheet. There was an account of Hitler's invasion of Transylvania, and a recipe for butterless strawberry tart, and the account of the crime rate. "London is currently the perfect place for the criminal element," Nelson was quoted as saying. "We must constantly be on the lookout for wrongdoing."

Below the recipe was a story about a Scottish terrier named Bonny Charlie who had barked and scrabbled wildly at the ruins of a collapsed house till wardens heeded his cries, dug down, and discovered two unharmed children.

I must have fallen asleep reading that because the next thing I knew Morris was shaking me and telling me the sirens had gone. It was only five o'clock.

At half-past we had an HE in our sector. It was just three blocks from

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the post, and the walls shook and plaster rained down on Twickenham's typewriter and on Renfrew, lying awake in his cot.

"Frivolities, my foot," Mrs. Lucy muttered as we dived for our tin hats. "We need those reinforcing beams."

The part-times hadn't come on duty yet. Mrs. Lucy left Renfrew to send them on. We knew exactly where the incident was—Morris had been looking in that direction when it went—but even so we had difficulty finding it. It was still evening, but by the time we had gone half a block, it was pitch black.

The first time that had happened, I thought it was some sort of after-blindness from the blast, but it's only the brick and plaster dust from the collapsed buildings. It rises up in a haze that's darker than any blackout curtain, obscuring everything. When Mrs. Lucy set up shop on a stretch of sidewalk and switched on the blue incident light it glowed spectrally in the manmade fog.

"Only two families still in the street," she said, holding the register up to the light. "The Kirkcuddy family and the Hodgsons."

"Are they an old couple?" Morris asked, appearing suddenly out of the fog.

She peered at the register. "Yes. Pensioners."

"I found them," he said in that flat voice that meant they were dead. "Blast."

"Oh, dear," she said. "The Kirkcuddys are a mother and two children. They've an Anderson shelter." She held the register closer to the blue light. "Everyone else has been using the tube shelter." She unfolded a map and showed us where the Kirkcuddys' backyard had been, but it was no help. We spent the next hour wandering blindly over the mounds, listening for sounds that were impossible to hear over the Luftwaffe's comments and the ack-ack's replies.

Petersby showed up a little past eight and Jack a few minutes later, and Mrs. Lucy set them to wandering in the fog too.

"Over here," Jack shouted almost immediately, and my heart gave an odd jerk.

"Oh, good, he's heard them," Mrs. Lucy said. "Jack, go and find him."

"Over here," he called again, and I started off in the direction of his voice, almost afraid of what I would find, but I hadn't gone ten steps before I could hear it, too. A baby crying, and a hollow, echoing sound like someone banging a fist against tin.

"Don't stop," Vi shouted. She was kneeling next to Jack in a shallow crater. "Keep making noise. We're coming." She looked up at me. "Tell Mrs. Lucy to ring the rescue squad."

I blundered my way back to Mrs. Lucy through the darkness. She had already rung up the rescue squad. She sent me to Sloane Square to make sure the rest of the inhabitants of the block were safely there.

The dust had lifted a little but not enough for me to see where I was going. I pitched off a curb into the street and tripped over a pile of debris

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and then a body. When I shone my torch on it, I saw it was the girl I had walked to the shelter three nights before.

She was sitting against the tiled entrance to the station, still holding a dress on a hanger in her limp hand. The old stewpot at John Lewis's never let her off even a minute before closing, and the Luftwaffe had been early. She had been killed by the blast, or by flying glass. Her face and neck and hands were covered with tiny cuts, and glass crunched underfoot when I moved her legs together.

I went back to the incident and waited for the mortuary van and went with them to the shelter. It took me three hours to find the families on my list. By the time I got back to the incident, the rescue squad was five feet down.

"They're nearly there," Vi said, dumping a basket on the far side of the crater. "All that's coming up now is dirt and the occasional rosebush."

"Where's Jack?" I said.

"He went for a saw." She took the basket back and handed it to one of the rescue squad, who had to put his cigarette into his mouth to free his hands before he could take it. "There was a board, but they dug past it."

I leaned over the table. I could hear the sound of banging but not the baby. "Are they still alive?"

She shook her head. "We haven't heard the baby for an hour or so. We keep calling, but there's no answer. We're afraid the banging may be something mechanical."

I wondered if they were dead and Jack, knowing it, had not gone for a saw at all but off to that day job of his.

Swales came up. "Guess who's in hospital?" he said.

"Who?" Vi said.

"Olmwood. Nelson had his wardens out walking patrols during a raid, and he caught a piece of shrapnel from one of the ack-acks in the leg. Nearly took it off."

The rescue worker with the cigarette handed a heaping basket to Vi. She took it, staggering a little under the weight, and carried it off.

"You'd better not let Nelson see you working like that," Swales called after her, "or he'll have you transferred to his sector. Where's Morris?" he said and went off, presumably to tell him and whoever else he could find about Olmwood.

Jack came up, carrying the saw.

"They don't need it," the rescue worker said, the cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth. "Mobile's here," he said and went off for a cup of tea.

Jack knelt and handed the saw down the hole.

"Are they still alive?" I asked.

Jack leaned over the hole, his hands clutching the edges. The banging was incredibly loud. It must have been deafening inside the Anderson. Jack stared into the hole as if he heard neither the banging nor my voice.

He stood up, still looking into the hole. "They're farther to the left," he said.

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How can they be farther to the left? I thought. We can hear them. They're directly under us. "Are they alive?" I said.

"Yes."

Swales came back. "He's a spy, that's what he is," he said. "Hitler sent him here to kill off our best men one by one. I told you his name was Adolf Von Nelson."

The Kirkcuddys were farther to the left. The rescue squad had to widen the tunnel, cut the top of the Anderson open and pry it back, like opening a can of tomatoes. It took till nine o'clock in the morning, but they were all alive.

Jack left sometime before it got light. I didn't see him go. Swales was telling me about Olmwood's injury, and when I turned around, Jack was gone.

"Has Jack told you where this job of his is that he has to leave so early for?" I asked Vi when I got back to the post.

She had propped a mirror against one of the gas masks and was putting her hair up in pincurls. "No," she said, dipping a comb in a glass of water and wetting a lock of her hair. "Jack, could you reach me my bobby pins? I've a date this afternoon, and I want to look my best."

I pushed the pins across to her. "What sort of job is it? Did Jack say?"

"No. Some sort of war work, I should think." She wound a lock of hair around her finger. "He's had ten kills. Four Stukas and six 109's."

I sat down next to Twickenham, who was typing up the incident report. "Have you interviewed Jack yet?"

"When would I have had time?" Twickenham asked. "We haven't had a quiet night since he came."

Renfrew shuffled in from the other room. He had a blanket wrapped round him Indian-style and a bedspread over his shoulders. He looked terrible, pale and drawn as a ghost.

"Would you like some breakfast?" Vi asked, prying a pin open with her teeth.

He shook his head. "Did Nelson approve the reinforcements?"

"No," Twickenham said in spite of Vi's signaling him not to.

"You must tell Nelson it's an emergency," he said, hugging the blanket to him as if he were cold. "I know why they're after me. It was before the war. When Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia I wrote a letter to the *Times*."

I was grateful Swales wasn't there. A letter to the *Times*.

"Come, now, why don't you go and lie down for a bit?" Vi said, securing a curl with a bobby pin as she stood up. "You're tired, that's all, and that's what's getting you so worried. They don't even get the *Times* over there."

She took his arm, and he went docilely with her into the other room. I heard him say, "I called him a lowland bully. In the letter." The person suffering from severe sleep loss may hallucinate, hearing voices, seeing visions, or believing fantastical things.

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"Has he mentioned what sort of day job he has?" I asked Twickenham.

"Who?" he asked, still typing.

"Jack."

"No, but whatever it is, let's hope he's as good at it as he is at finding bodies." He stopped and peered at what he'd just typed. "This makes five, doesn't it?"

Vi came back. "And we'd best not let von Nelson find out about it," she said. She sat down and dipped the comb into the glass of water. "He'd take him like he took Olmwood, and we're already shorthanded, with Renfrew the way he is."

Mrs. Lucy came in carrying the incident light, disappeared into the pantry with it, and came out again carrying an application form. "Might I use the typewriter, Mr. Twickenham?" she asked.

He pulled his sheet of paper out of the typewriter and stood up. Mrs. Lucy sat down, rolled in the form, and began typing. "I've decided to apply directly to Civil Defence for reinforcements," she said.

"What sort of day job does Jack have?" I asked her.

"War work," she said. She pulled the application out, turned it over, rolled it back in. "Jack, would you mind taking this over to headquarters?"

"Works days," Vi said, making a pin curl on the back of her head. "Raids every night. When does he sleep?"

"I don't know," I said.

"He'd best be careful," she said. "Or he'll turn into one of the walking dead, like Renfrew."

Mrs. Lucy signed the application form, folded it in half, and gave it to me. I took it to Civil Defence headquarters and spent half a day trying to find the right office to give it to.

"It's not the correct form," the sixth girl said. "She needs to file an A-114, Exterior Improvements."

"It's not exterior," I said. "The post is applying for reinforcing beams for the cellar."

"Reinforcements are classified as exterior improvements," she said. She handed me the form, which looked identical to the one Mrs. Lucy had already filled in, and I left.

On the way out, Nelson stopped me. I thought he was going to tell me my uniform was a disgrace again, but instead he pointed to my tin hat and demanded, "Why aren't you wearing a regulation helmet, warden? 'All ARP wardens shall wear a helmet with the letter W in red on the front,' " he quoted.

I took my hat off and looked at it. The red W had partly chipped away so that it looked like a V.

"What post are you?" he barked.

"Forty-eight. Chelsea," I said and wondered if he expected me to salute.

"Mrs. Lucy is your warden," he said disgustedly, and I expected his next question to be what I was doing at Civil Defence, but instead he

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said, "I heard about Colonel Godalming. Your post has been having good luck locating casualties these last few raids."

"Yes, sir," was obviously the wrong answer, and "no, sir," would make him suspicious. "We found three people in an Anderson last night," I said. "One of the children had the wits to bang on the roof with a pair of pliers."

"I've heard that the person finding them is a new man, Settle." He sounded friendly, almost jovial. Like Hitler at Munich.

"Settle?" I said blankly. "Mrs. Lucy was the one who found the Anderson."

Morris's son Quincy's surprise was the Victoria Cross. "A medal," he said over and over. "Who'd have thought it, my Quincy with a medal? Fifteen planes he shot down."

It had been presented at a special ceremony at Quincy's commanding officer's headquarters, and the Duchess of York herself had been there. Morris had pinned the medal on himself.

"I wore my suit," he told us for the hundredth time, "in case he was in trouble I wanted to make a good impression, and a good thing, too. What would the Duchess of York have thought if I'd gone looking like this?"

He looked pretty bad. We all did. We'd had two breadbaskets of incendiaries, one right after the other, and Vi had been on watch. We had had to save the butcher's again, and a baker's two blocks farther down, and a thirteenth century crucifix.

"I *told* him it went through the altar roof," Vi had said disgustedly when she and I finally got it out. "Your friend Jack couldn't find an incendiary if it fell on him."

"You told Jack the incendiary came down on the church?" I said, looking up at the carved wooden figure. The bottom of the cross was blackened, and Christ's nailed feet, as if he had been burnt at the stake instead of crucified.

"Yes," she said. "I even told him it was the altar." She looked back up the nave. "And he could have seen it as soon as he came into the church."

"What did he say? That it wasn't there?"

Vi was looking speculatively up at the roof. "It could have been caught in the rafters and come down after. It hardly matters, does it? We put it out. Come on, let's get back to the post," she said, shivering. "I'm freezing."

I was freezing, too. We were both sopping wet. The AFS had stormed up after we had the fire under control and sprayed everything in sight with icy water.

"Pinned it on myself, I did," Morris said. "The Duchess of York kissed him on both cheeks and said he was the pride of England." He had brought a bottle of wine to celebrate the Cross. He got Renfrew up and brought him to the table, draped in his blankets, and ordered Twickenham to put his typewriter away. Petersby brought in extra chairs, and Mrs. Lucy went upstairs to get her crystal.

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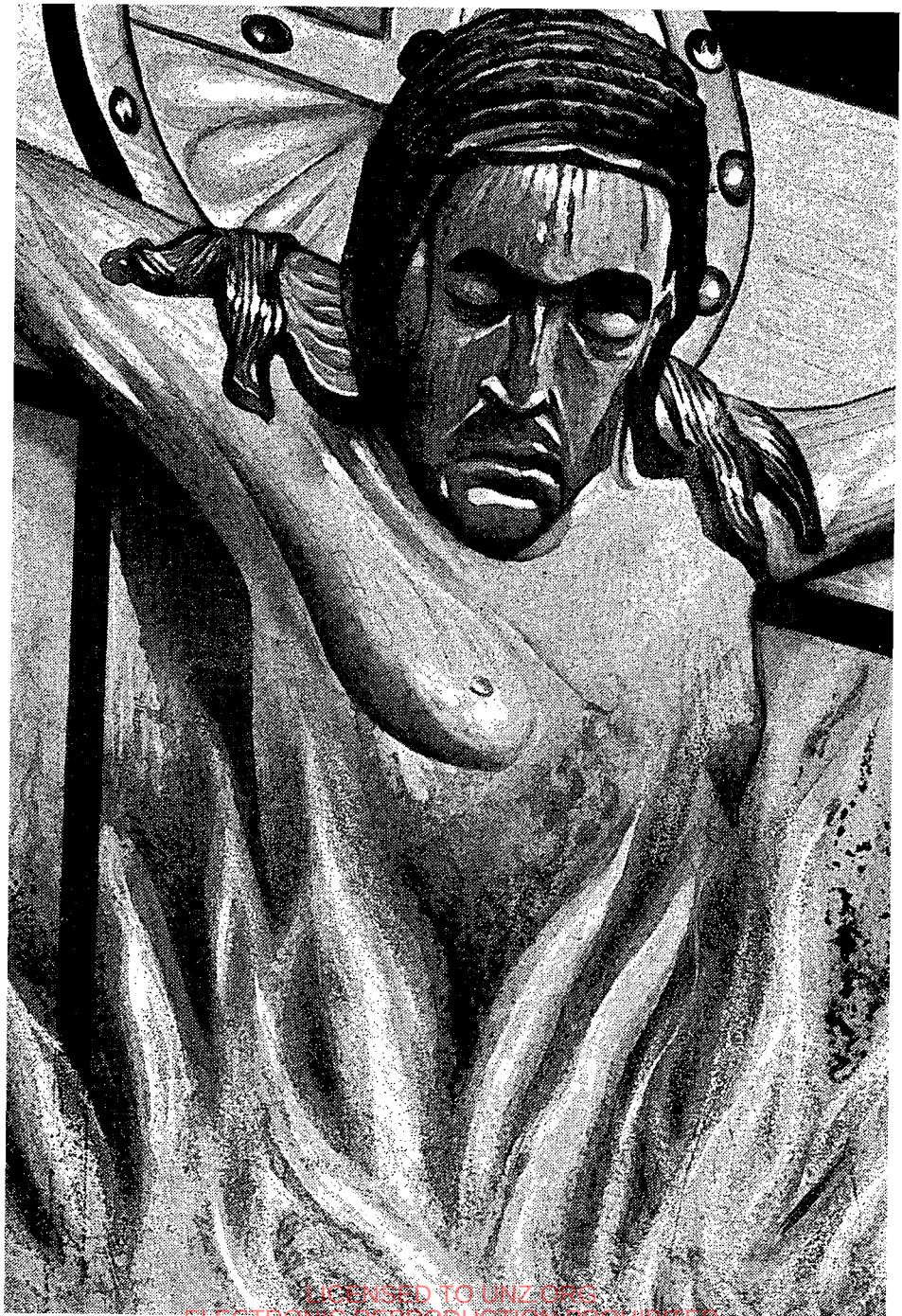

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"Only eight, I'm afraid," she said, coming down with the stemmed goblets in her blackened hands. "The Germans have broken the rest. Who's willing to make do with the tooth glass?"

"I don't care for any, thank you," Jack said. "I don't drink."

"What's that?" Morris said jovially. He had taken off his tin helmet, and below the white line it left he looked like he was wearing blackface in a music hall show. "You've got to toast my boy at least. Just imagine. My Quincy with a medal."

Mrs. Lucy rinsed out the porcelain tooth glass and handed it to Vi, who was pouring out the wine. They passed the goblets round. Jack took the tooth glass.

"To my son Quincy, the best pilot in the RAF!" Morris said, raising his goblet.

"May he shoot down the entire Luftwaffe!" Swales shouted, "and put an end to this bloody war!"

"So a man can get a decent night's sleep!" Renfrew said, and everyone laughed.

We drank. Jack raised his glass with the others but when Vi took the bottle round again, he put his hand over the mouth of it.

"Just think of it," Morris said. "My son Quincy with a medal. He had his troubles in school, in with a bad lot, problems with the police. I worried about him, I did, wondered what he'd come to, and then this war comes along and here he is a hero."

"To heroes!" Petersby said.

We drank again, and Vi dribbled out the last of the wine into Morris's glass. "That's the lot, I'm afraid." She brightened. "I've a bottle of cherry cordial Charlie gave me."

Mrs. Lucy made a face. "Just a minute," she said, disappeared into the pantry, and came back with two cobwebbed bottles of port, which she poured out generously and a little sloppily.

"The presence of intoxicating beverages on post is strictly forbidden," she said. "A fine of five shillings will be imposed for a first offense, one pound for subsequent offenses." She took out a pound note and laid it on the table. "I wonder what Nelson was before the war?"

"A monster," Vi said.

I looked across at Jack. He still had his hand over his glass.

"A headmaster," Swales said. "No, I've got it. An Inland Revenue collector!"

Everyone laughed.

"I was a horrid person before the war," Mrs. Lucy said.

Vi giggled.

"I was a deaconess, one of those dreadful women who arranges the flowers in the sanctuary and gets up jumble sales and bullies the rector. 'The Terror of the Churchwardens,' that's what I used to be. I was determined that they should put the hymnals front side out on the backs of the pews. Morris knows. He sang in the choir."

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"It's true," Morris said. "She used to instruct the choir on the proper way to line up."

I tried to imagine her as a stickler, as a petty tyrant like Nelson, and failed.

"Sometimes it takes something dreadful like a war for one to find one's proper job," she said, staring at her glass.

"To the war!" Swales said gaily.

"I'm not sure we should toast something so terrible as that," Twickenham said doubtfully.

"It isn't all that terrible," Vi said. "I mean, without it, we wouldn't all be here together, would we?"

"And you'd never have met all those pilots of yours, would you, Vi?" Swales said.

"There's nothing wrong with making the best of a bad job," Vi said, miffed.

"Some people do more than that," Swales said. "Some people take positive advantage of the war. Like Colonel Godalming. I had a word with one of the AFS volunteers. Seems the Colonel didn't come back for his hunting rifle after all." He leaned forward confidingly. "Seems he was having a bit on with a blonde dancer from the Windmill. *Seems* his wife thought he was out shooting grouse in Surrey and now she's asking all sorts of unpleasant questions."

"He's not the only one taking advantage," Morris said. "That night you got the Kirkcuddys out, Jack, I found an old couple killed by blast. I put them by the road for the mortuary van, and later I saw somebody over there, bending over the bodies, doing something to them. I thought, he must be straightening them out before the rigor sets in, but then it comes to me. He's robbing them. Dead bodies."

"And who's to say they were killed by blast?" Swales said. "Who's to say they weren't murdered? There's lots of bodies, aren't there, and nobody looks close at them? Who's to say they were all killed by the Germans?"

"How did we get on to this?" Petersby said. "We're supposed to be celebrating Quincy Morris's medal, not talking about murderers." He raised his glass. "To Quincy Morris!"

"And the RAF!" Vi said.

"To making the best of a bad job," Mrs. Lucy said.

"Hear, hear," Jack said softly and raised his glass, but he still didn't drink.

Jack found four people in the next three days. I did not hear any of them until well after we had started digging, and the last one, a fat woman in striped pyjamas and a pink hairnet, I never did hear, though she said when we brought her up that she had "called and called between prayers."

Twickenham wrote it all up for the *Twitterings*, tossing out the article

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on Quincy Morris's medal and typing up a new master's. When Mrs. Lucy borrowed the typewriter to fill in the A-114, she said, "What's this?"

"My lead story," he said. " 'Settle Finds Four in Rubble.' " He handed her the master's.

" 'Jack Settle, the newest addition to Post Forty-Eight,' " she read, " 'located four air raid victims last night. "I wanted to be useful," says the modest Mr. Settle when asked why he came to London from Yorkshire. And he's been useful since his very first night on the job when he—' " She handed it back to him. "Sorry. You can't print that. Nelson's been nosing about, asking questions. He's already taken one of my wardens and nearly gotten him killed. I won't let him have another."

"That's censorship!" Twickenham said, outraged.

"There's a war on," Mrs. Lucy said, "and we're shorthanded. I've relieved Mr. Renfrew of duty. He's going to stay with his sister in Birmingham. And I wouldn't let Nelson have another one of my wardens if we were overstaffed. He's already gotten Olmwood nearly killed."

She handed me the A-114 and asked me to take it to Civil Defence. I did. The girl I had spoken to wasn't there, and the girl who was said, "This is for *interior* improvements. You need to fill out a D-268."

"I did," I said, "and I was told that reinforcements qualified as exterior improvements."

"Only if they're on the outside." She handed me a D-268. "Sorry," she said apologetically. "I'd help you if I could, but my boss is a stickler for the correct forms."

"There's something else you can do for me," I said. "I was supposed to take one of our part-times a message at his day job, but I've lost the address. If you could look it up for me. Jack Settle? If not, I've got to go all the way back to Chelsea to get it."

She looked back over her shoulder and then said, "Wait a mo," and darted down the hall. She came back with a sheet of paper.

"Settle?" she said. "Post Forty Eight, Chelsea?"

"That's the one," I said. "I need his work address."

"He hasn't got one."

He had left the incident while we were still getting the fat woman out. It was starting to get light. We had a rope under her, and a makeshift winch, and he had abruptly handed his end to Swales and said, "I've got to leave for my day job."

"You're certain?" I said.

"I'm certain." She handed me the sheet of paper. It was Jack's approval for employment as a part-time warden, signed by Mrs. Lucy. The spaces for work and home addresses had been left blank. "This is all there was in the file," she said. "No work permit, no identity card, not even a ration card. We keep copies of all that, so he must not have a job."

I took the D-268 back to the post, but Mrs. Lucy wasn't there. "One of Nelson's wardens came round with a new regulation," Twickenham said, running off copies on the duplicating machine. "All wardens will be out on patrol unless on telephone or spotter duty. *All* wardens. She went off

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to give him what-for," he said, sounding pleased. He was apparently over his anger at her for censoring his story on Jack.

I picked up one of the still-wet copies of the newssheet. The lead story was about Hitler's invasion of Greece. He had put the article about Quincy Morris's medal down in the right-hand corner under a list of "What the War Has Done For Us." Number one was, "It's made us discover capabilities we didn't know we had."

"She called him a murderer," Twickenham said.

A murderer.

"What did you want to tell her?" Twickenham said.

That Jack doesn't have a job, I thought. Or a ration card. That he didn't put out the incendiary in the church even though Vi told him it had gone through the altar roof. That he knew the Anderson was farther to the left.

"It's still the wrong form," I said, taking out the D-268.

"That's easily remedied," he said. He rolled the application into the typewriter, typed for a few minutes, handed it back to me.

"Mrs. Lucy has to sign it," I said, and he snatched it back, whipped out a fountain pen, and signed her name.

"What were you before the war?" I asked. "A forger?"

"You'd be surprised." He handed the form back to me. "You look dreadful, Jack. Have you gotten any sleep this last week?"

"When would I have had the chance?"

"Why don't you lie down now while no one's here?" he said, reaching for my arm the way Vi had reached for Renfrew's. "I'll take the form back to Civil Defence for you."

I shook off his arm. "I'm all right."

I walked back to Civil Defence. The girl who had tried to find Jack's file wasn't there, and the first girl was. I was sorry I hadn't brought the A-114 along as well, but she scrutinized the form without comment and stamped the back. "It will take approximately six weeks to process," she said.

"Six weeks!' I said. "Hitler could have invaded the entire Empire by then."

"In that case, you'll very likely have to file a different form."

I didn't go back to the post. Mrs. Lucy would doubtless be back by the time I returned, but what could I say to her? I suspect Jack. Of what? Of not liking lamb chops and cake? Of having to leave early for work? Of rescuing children from the rubble?

He had said he had a job and the girl couldn't find his work permit, but it took the Civil Defence six weeks to process a request for a few beams. It would probably take them till the end of the war to file the work permits. Or perhaps his had been in the file, and the girl had missed it. Loss of sleep can result in mistakes on the job. And odd fixations.

I walked to Sloane Square Station. There was no sign of where the young woman had been. They had even swept the glass up. Her stewpot of a boss at John Lewis's never let her go till closing time, even if the

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sirens had gone, even if it was dark. She had had to hurry through the blacked-out streets all alone, carrying her dress for the next day on a hanger, listening to the guns and trying to make out how far off the planes were. If someone had been stalking her, she would never have heard him, never have seen him in the darkness. Whoever found her would think she had been killed by flying glass.

He doesn't eat, I would say to Mrs. Lucy. He didn't put out an incendiary in a church. He always leaves the incidents before dawn, even when we don't have the casualties up. The Luftwaffe is trying to kill me. It was a letter I wrote to the *Times*. The walking dead may hallucinate, hearing voices, seeing visions, or believing fantastical things.

The sirens went. I must have been standing there for hours, staring at the sidewalk. I went back to the post. Mrs. Lucy was there. "You look dreadful, Jack. How long's it been since you've slept?"

"I don't know," I said. "Where's Jack?"

"On watch," Mrs. Lucy said.

"You'd best be careful," Vi said, setting chocolates on a plate. "Or you'll turn into one of the walking dead. Would you like a sweet? Eddie gave them to me."

The telephone rang. Mrs. Lucy answered it, spoke a minute, hung up. "Slaney needs help on an incident," she said. "They've asked for Jack."

She sent both of us. We found the incident without any trouble. There was no dust cloud, no smell except from a fire burning off to one side. "This didn't just happen," I said. "It's a day old at least."

I was wrong. It was two days old. The rescue squads had been working straight through, and there were still at least thirty people unaccounted for. Some of the rescue squad were digging halfheartedly halfway up a mound, but most of them were standing about, smoking and looking like they were casualties themselves. Jack went up to where the men were digging, shook his head, and set off across the mound.

"Heard you had a bodysniffer," one of the smokers said to me. "They've got one in Whitechapel, too. Crawls round the incident on his hands and knees, sniffing like a bloodhound. Yours do that?"

"No," I said.

"Over here," Jack said.

"Says he can read their minds, the one in Whitechapel does," he said, putting out his cigarette and taking up a pickaxe. He clambered up the slope to where Jack was already digging.

It was easy to see because of the fire, and fairly easy to dig, but halfway down we struck the massive headboard of a bed.

"We'll have to go in from the side," Jack said.

"The hell with that," the man who'd told me about the bodysniffer said. "How do you know somebody's down there? I don't hear anything."

Jack didn't answer him. He moved down the slope and began digging into its side.

"They've been in there two days," the man said. "They're dead and I'm

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not getting overtime." He flung down the pickaxe and stalked off to the mobile canteen. Jack didn't even notice he was gone. He handed me baskets, and I emptied them, and occasionally Jack said, "Saw," or "Tin-snips," and I handed them to him. I was off getting the stretcher when he brought her out.

She was perhaps thirteen. She was wearing a white nightgown, or perhaps it only looked white because of the plaster dust. Jack's face was ghastly with it. He had picked her up in his arms, and she had fastened her arms about his neck and buried her face against his shoulder. They were both outlined by the fire.

I brought the stretcher up, and Jack knelt down and tried to lay her on it, but she would not let go of his neck. "It's all right," he said gently. "You're safe now."

He unclasped her hands and folded them on her chest. Her nightgown was streaked with dried blood, but it didn't seem to be hers. I wondered who else had been in there with her. "What's your name?" Jack said.

"Mina," she said. It was no more than a whisper.

"My name's Jack," he said. He nodded at me. "So's his. We're going to carry you down to the ambulance now. Don't be afraid. You're safe now."

The ambulance wasn't there yet. We laid the stretcher on the sidewalk, and I went over to the incident officer to see if it was on its way. Before I could get back, somebody shouted, "Here's another," and I went and helped dig out a hand that the foreman had found, and then the body all the blood had come from. When I looked down the hill the girl was still lying there on the stretcher, and Jack was bending over it.

I went out to Whitechapel to see the bodysniffer the next day. He wasn't there. "He's a part-time," the post warden told me, clearing off a chair so I could sit down. The post was a mess, dirty clothes and dishes everywhere.

An old woman in a print wrapper was frying up kidneys in a skillet. "Works days in munitions out to Dorking," she said.

"How exactly is he able to locate the bodies?" I asked. "I heard—"

"That he reads their minds?" the woman said. She scraped the kidneys onto a plate and handed it to the post warden. "He's heard it, too, more's the pity, and it's gone straight to his head. 'I can feel them under here,' he says to the rescue squads, like he was Houdini or something, and points to where they're supposed to start digging."

"Then how does he find them?"

"Luck," the warden said.

"*I* think he smells 'em," the woman said. "That's why they call 'em bodysniffers."

The warden snorted. "Over the stink the jerries put in the bombs and the gas and all the rest of it?"

"If he were a—" I said and didn't finish it. "If he had an acute sense of smell, perhaps he could smell the blood."

"You can't even smell the bodies when they've been dead a week," the

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warden said, his mouth full of kidneys. "He hears them screaming, same as us."

"He's got better hearing than us," the woman said, switching happily to his theory. "Most of us are half-deaf from the guns, and he isn't."

I hadn't been able to hear the fat woman in the pink hairnet, although she'd said she had called for help. But Jack, just down from Yorkshire, where they hadn't been deafened by anti-aircraft guns for weeks, could. There was nothing sinister about it. Some people had better hearing than others.

"We pulled an army colonel out last week who claimed he didn't cry out," I said.

"He's lying," the warden said, sawing at a kidney. "We had a nanny, two days ago, prim and proper as you please, swore the whole time we was getting her out, words to make a sailor blush, and then claimed she didn't. 'Unclean words have *never* crossed my lips and never will,' she says to me." He brandished his fork at me. "Your colonel cried out, all right. He just won't admit it."

"I didn't make a sound," Colonel Godalming had said, brandishing his serving spoon. "Knew it wouldn't do any good," and perhaps the warden was right, and it was only bluster. But he hadn't wanted his wife to know he was in London, to find out about the dancer at the Windmill. He had had good reason to keep silent, to try to dig himself out.

I went home and rang up a girl I knew in the ambulance service and asked her to find out where they had taken Mina. She rang me back with the answer in a few minutes, and I took the tube over to St. George's Hospital. The others had all cried out, or banged on the roof of the Anderson, except Mina. She had been so frightened when Jack got her out she couldn't speak above a whisper, but that didn't mean she hadn't cried or whimpered.

"When you were buried last night, did you call for help?" I would ask her, and she would answer me in her mouse voice, "I called and called between prayers. Why?" And I would say, "It's nothing, an odd fixation brought on by lack of sleep. Jack spends his days in Dorking, at a munitions plant, and has exceptionally acute hearing." And there is no more truth to my theory than to Renfrew's belief that the raids were brought on by a letter to the *Times*.

St. George's had an entrance marked "Casualty Clearing Station." I asked the nursing sister behind the desk if I could see Mina.

"She was brought in last night. The James Street incident."

She looked at a penciled and crossed-over roster. "I don't show an admission by that name."

"I'm certain she was brought here," I said, twisting my head round to read the list. "There isn't another St. George's, is there?"

She shook her head and lifted up the roster to look at a second sheet.

"Here she is," she said, and I had heard the rescue squads use that tone of voice often enough to know what it meant, but that was impossible. She had been under that headboard. The blood on her nightgown hadn't even been hers.

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"I'm so sorry," the sister said.

"When did she die?" I said.

"This morning," she said, checking the second list, which was much longer than the first.

"Did anyone else come to see her?"

"I don't know. I've just been on since eleven."

"What did she die of?"

She looked at me as if I were insane.

"What was the listed cause of death?" I said.

She had to find Mina's name on the roster again. "Shock due to loss of blood," she said, and I thanked her and went to find Jack.

He found me. I had gone back to the post and waited till everyone was asleep and Mrs. Lucy had gone upstairs and then sneaked into the pantry to look up Jack's address in Mrs. Lucy's files. It had not been there, as I had known it wouldn't. And if there had been an address, what would it have turned out to be when I went to find it? A gutted house? A mound of rubble?

I had gone to Sloane Square Station, knowing he wouldn't be there, but having no other place to look. He could have been anywhere. London was full of empty houses, bombed-out cellars, secret places to hide until it got dark. That was why he had come here.

"If I was a bad'n, I'd head straight for London," Swales had said. But the criminal element weren't the only ones who had come, drawn by the blackout and the easy pickings and the bodies. Drawn by the blood.

I stood there until it started to get dark, watching two boys scrabble in the gutter for candy that had been blown out of a confectioner's front window, and then walked back to a doorway down the street from the post, where I could see the door, and waited. The sirens went. Swales left on patrol. Petersby went in. Morris came out, stopping to peer at the sky as if he were looking for his son Quincy. Mrs. Lucy must not have managed to talk Nelson out of the patrols.

It got dark. The searchlights began to crisscross the sky, catching the silver of the barrage balloons. The planes started coming in from the east, a low hum. Vi hurried in, wearing high heels and carrying a box tied with string. Petersby and Twickenham left on patrol. Vi came out, fastening her helmet strap under her chin and eating something.

"I've been looking for you everywhere," Jack said.

I turned around. He had driven up in a lorry marked ATS. He had left the door open and the motor running. "I've got the beams," he said. "For reinforcing the post. The incident we were on last night, all these beams were lying on top, and I asked the owner of the house if I could buy them from him."

He gestured to the back of the lorry, where jagged ends of wood were sticking out. "Come along then, we can get them up tonight if we hurry." He started toward the truck. "Where were you? I've looked everywhere for you."

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"I went to St. George's Hospital," I said.

He stopped, his hand on the open door of the truck.

"Mina's dead," I said, "but you knew that, didn't you?"

He didn't say anything.

"The nurse said she died of loss of blood," I said. A flare drifted down, lighting his face with a deadly whiteness. "I know what you are."

"If we hurry, we can get the reinforcements up before the raid starts," he said. He started to pull the door to.

I put my hand on it to keep him from closing it. "War work," I said bitterly. "What do you do, make sure you're alone in the tunnel with them or go to see them in hospital afterward?"

He let go of the door.

"Brilliant stroke, volunteering for the ARP," I said. "Nobody's going to suspect the noble air raid warden, especially when he's so good at locating casualties. And if some of those casualties die later, if somebody's found dead on the street after a raid, well, it's only to be expected. There's a war on."

The drone overhead got suddenly louder, and a whole shower of flares came down. The searchlights wheeled, trying to find the planes. Jack took hold of my arm.

"Get down," he said, and tried to drag me into the doorway.

I shook his arm off. "I'd kill you if I could," I said. "But I can't, can I?" I waved my hand at the sky. "And neither can they. Your sort don't die, do they?"

There was a long swish, and the rising scream. "I *will* kill you, though," I shouted over it. "If you touch Vi or Mrs. Lucy."

"Mrs. Lucy," he said, and I couldn't tell if he said it with astonishment or contempt.

"Or Vi or any of the rest of them. I'll drive a stake through your heart or whatever it takes," I said, and the air fell apart.

There was a long sound like an enormous monster growling. It seemed to go on and on. I tried to put my hands over my ears, but I had to hang onto the road to keep from falling. The roar became a scream, and the sidewalk shook itself sharply, and I fell off.

"Are you all right?" Jack said.

I was sitting next to the lorry, which was on its side. The beams had spilled out the back. "Were we hit?" I said.

"No," he said, but I already knew that, and before he had finished pulling me to my feet, I was running toward the post that we couldn't see for the dust.

Mrs. Lucy had told Nelson having everyone out on patrol would mean no one could be found in an emergency, but that was not true. They were all there within minutes, Swales and Morris and Violet, clattering up in her high heels, and Petersby. They ran up, one after the other, and then stopped and looked stupidly at the space that had been Mrs. Lucy's house, as if they couldn't make out what it was.

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"Where's Renfrew?" Jack said.

"In Birmingham." Vi said.

"He wasn't here," I explained. "He's on sick leave." I peered through the smoke and dust, trying to see their faces. "Where's Twickenham?"

"Here," he said.

"Where's Mrs. Lucy?" I said.

"Over here," Jack said, and pointed down into the rubble.

We dug all night. Two different rescue squads came to help. They called down every half hour, but there was no answer. Vi borrowed a light from somewhere, draped a blue headscarf over it, and set up as incident officer. An ambulance came, sat awhile, left to go to another incident, came back. Nelson took over as incident officer, and Vi came back up to help. "Is she alive?" she asked.

"She'd better be," I said, looking at Jack.

It began to mist. The planes came over again, dropping flares and incendiaries, but no one stopped work. Twickenham's typewriter came up in the baskets, and one of Mrs. Lucy's wine glasses. It began to get light. Jack looked vaguely up at the sky.

"Don't even think about it," I said. "You're not going anywhere."

At around three Morris thought he heard something, and we stopped and called down, but there was no answer. The mist turned into a drizzle at a little past half past four. I shouted to Mrs. Lucy, and she called back, from far underground, "I'm here."

"Are you all right?" I shouted.

"My leg's hurt. I think it's broken," she shouted, her voice calm. "I seem to be under the table."

"Don't worry," I shouted. "We're nearly there."

The drizzle turned the plaster dust into a slippery, disgusting mess. We had to brace the tunnel repeatedly and cover it with a tarpaulin, and then it was too dark to see to dig. Swales lay above us, holding a pocket torch over our heads so we could see. The All-Clear went.

"Jack!" Mrs. Lucy called up.

"Yes!" I shouted.

"Was that the All-Clear?"

"Yes," I shouted. "Don't worry. We'll have you out soon now."

"What time is it?"

It was too dark in the tunnel to see my watch. I made a guess. "A little after five."

"Is Jack there?"

"Yes."

"He mustn't stay," she said. "Tell him to go home."

The rain stopped. We ran into one and then another of the oak beams that had reinforced the landing on the fourth floor and had to saw through them. Swales reported that Morris had called Nelson "a bloody murderer." Vi brought up paper cups of tea.

We called down to Mrs. Lucy, but there wasn't any answer. "She's

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probably dozed off," Twickenham said, and the others nodded as if they believed him.

We could smell the gas long before we got to her, but Jack kept on digging, and like the others, I told myself that she was all right, that we would get to her in time.

She was not under the table after all, but under part of the pantry door. We had to call for a jack to get it off her. It took Morris a long time to come back with it, but it didn't matter. She was lying perfectly straight, her arms folded across her chest and her eyes closed as if she were asleep. Her left leg had been taken off at the knee. Jack knelt beside her and cradled her head.

"Keep your hands off her," I said.

I made Swales come down and help get her out. Vi and Twickenham put her on the stretcher. Petersby went for the ambulance. "She was never a horrid person, you know," Morris said. "Never."

It began to rain again, the sky so dark it was impossible to tell whether the sun had come up yet or not. Swales brought a tarp to cover Mrs. Lucy.

Petersby came back. "The ambulance has gone off again," he said. "I've sent for the mortuary van, but they said they doubt they can be here before half past eight."

I looked at Jack. He was standing over the tarp, his hands slackly at his sides. He looked worse than Renfrew ever had, impossibly tired, his face gray with wet plaster dust. "We'll wait," I said.

"There's no point in all of us standing here in the rain for two hours," Morris said. "I'll wait here with the . . . I'll wait here. Jack," he turned to him, "go and report to Nelson."

"I'll do it," Vi said. "Jack needs to get to his day job."

"Is she up?" Nelson said. He clambered over the fourth-floor beams to where we were standing. "Is she dead?" He glared at Morris and then at my hat, and I wondered if he were going to reprimand me for the condition of my uniform.

"Which of you found her?" he demanded.

I looked at Jack. "Settle did," I said. "He's a regular wonder. He's found six this week alone."

Two days after Mrs. Lucy's funeral, a memo came through from Civil Defence transferring Jack to Nelson's post, and I got my official notice to report for duty. I was sent to basic training and then on to Portsmouth. Vi sent me food packets, and Twickenham posted me copies of his *Twitterings*.

The post had relocated across the street from the butcher's in a house belonging to a Miss Arthur, who had subsequently joined the post. "Miss Arthur loves knitting and flower arranging and will make a valuable addition to our brave little band," Twickenham had written. Vi had got engaged to a pilot in the RAF. Hitler had bombed Birmingham. Jack, in

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Nelson's post now, had saved sixteen people in one week, a record for the ARP.

After two weeks I was shipped to North Africa, out of the reach of the mails. When I finally got Morris's letter, it was three months old. Jack had been killed while rescuing a child at an incident. A delayed-action bomb had fallen nearby, but "that bloody murderer Nelson" had refused to allow the rescue squad to evacuate. The D.A. had gone off, the tunnel Jack was working in had collapsed, and he'd been killed. They had gotten the child out, though, and she was unhurt except for a few cuts.

But he isn't dead, I thought. It's impossible to kill him. I had tried, but even betraying him to von Nelson hadn't worked, and he was still somewhere in London, hidden by the blackout and the noise of the bombs and the number of dead bodies, and who would notice a few more?

In January I helped take out a tank battalion at Tobruk. I killed nine Germans before I caught a piece of shrapnel. I was shipped to Gibraltar to hospital, where the rest of my mail caught up with me. Vi had gotten married, the raids had let up considerably, Jack had been awarded the George Cross posthumously.

In March I was sent back to hospital in England for surgery. It was near North Weald, where Morris's son Quincy was stationed. He came to see me after the surgery. He looked the very picture of an RAF pilot, firm-jawed, steely eyed, rakish grin, not at all like a delinquent minor. He was flying nightly bombing missions over Germany, he told me, "giving Hitler a bit of our own back."

"I hear you're to get a medal," he said, looking at the wall above my head as if he expected to see violets painted there, nine of them, one for each kill.

I asked him about his father. He was fine, he told me. He'd been appointed Senior Warden. "I admire you ARP people," he said, "saving lives and all that."

He meant it. He was flying nightly bombing missions over Germany, reducing their cities to rubble, creating incidents for their air raid wardens to scrabble through looking for dead children. I wondered if they had bodysniffers there, too, and if they were monsters like Jack.

"Dad wrote to me about your friend Jack," Quincy said. "It must have been rough, hearing so far away from home and all."

He looked genuinely sympathetic, and I supposed he was. He had shot down twenty-eight planes and killed who knows how many fat women in hairnets and thirteen-year-old girls, but no one had ever thought to call him a monster. The Duchess of York had called him the pride of England and kissed him on both cheeks.

"I went with Dad to Vi Westren's wedding," he said. "Pretty as a picture she was."

I thought of Vi, with her pincurls and her plain face. It was as though the war had transformed her into someone completely different, someone pretty and sought-after.

"There were strawberries and two kinds of cake," he said. "One of the

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wardens—Tottenham?—read a poem in honor of the happy couple. Wrote it himself."

It was as if the war had transformed Twickenham as well, and Mrs. Lucy, who had been the terror of the churchwardens. What the War Has Done for Us. But it hadn't transformed them. All that was wanted was for someone to give Vi a bit of attention for all her latent sweetness to blossom. Every girl is pretty when she knows she's sought after.

Twickenham had always longed to be a writer. Nelson had always been a bully and a stickler, and Mrs. Lucy, in spite of what she said, had never been either. "Sometimes it takes something dreadful like a war for one to find one's proper job," she'd said.

Like Quincy, who had been, in spite of what Morris said, a bad boy, headed for a life of petty crime or worse, when the war came along. And suddenly his wildness and daring and "high spirits" were virtues, were just what was needed.

What the War Has Done For Us. Number Two. It has made jobs that didn't exist before. Like RAF pilot. Like post warden. Like bodysniffer.

"Did they find Jack's body?" I asked, though I knew the answer. No, Quincy would say, we couldn't find it, or, there was nothing left.

"Didn't Dad tell you?" Quincy said with an anxious look at the transfusion bag hanging above the bed. "They had to dig past him to get to the little girl. It was pretty bad, Dad said. The blast from the D.A. had driven the leg of a chair straight through his chest."

So I had killed him after all. Nelson and Hitler and I.

"I shouldn't have told you that," Quincy said, watching the blood drip from the bag into my veins as if it were a bad sign. "I know he was a friend of yours. I wouldn't have told you only Dad said to tell you yours was the last name he said before he died. Just before the D.A. went up. 'Jack,' he said, like he knew what was going to happen, Dad said, and called out your name."

He didn't though, I thought. And "that bloody murderer Nelson" hadn't refused to evacuate him. Jack had just gone on working, oblivious to Nelson and the D.A., stabbing at the rubble as though he were trying to murder it, calling out "saw" and "wire cutters" and "braces." Calling out "jack." Oblivious to everything except getting them out before the gas killed them, before they bled to death. Oblivious to everything but his job.

I had been wrong about why he had joined the ARP, about why he had come to London. He must have lived a terrible life up there in Yorkshire, full of darkness and self-hatred and killing. When the war came, when he began reading of people buried in the rubble, of rescue wardens searching blindly for them, it must have seemed a godsend. A blessing.

It wasn't, I think, that he was trying to atone for what he'd done, for what he was. It's impossible, at any rate. I had only killed ten people, counting Jack, and had helped rescue nearly twenty, but it doesn't cancel out. And I don't think that was what he wanted. What he had wanted was to be useful.

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"Here's to making the best of a bad job," Mrs. Lucy had said, and that was all any of them had been doing: Swales with his jokes and gossip, and Twickenham, and Jack, and if they found friendship or love or atonement as well, it was no less than they deserved. And it was still a bad job.

"I should be going," Quincy said, looking worriedly at me. "You need your rest, and I need to be getting back to work. The German army's halfway to Cairo, and Yugoslavia's joined the Axis." He looked excited, happy. "You must rest, and get well. We need you back in this war."

"I'm glad you came," I said.

"Yes, well, Dad wanted me to tell you that about Jack calling for you." He stood up. "Tough luck, your getting it in the neck like this." He slapped his flight cap against his leg. "I hate this war," he said, but he was lying.

"So do I," I said.

"They'll have you back killing jerries in no time," he said.

"Yes."

He put his cap on at a rakish angle and went off to bomb lecherous retired colonels and children and widows who had not yet managed to get reinforcing beams out of the Hamburg Civil Defence and paint violets on his plane. Doing his bit.

A sister brought in a tray. She had a large red cross sewn to the bib of her apron.

"No, thanks, I'm not hungry," I said.

"You must keep your strength up," she said. She set the tray beside the bed and went out.

"The war's been rather a blessing for our Vi," I had told Jack, and perhaps it was. But not for most people. Not for girls who worked at John Lewis's for old stewpots who never let them leave early even when the sirens had gone. Not for those people who discovered hidden capabilities for insanity or betrayal or bleeding to death. Or murder.

The sirens went. The nurse came in to check my transfusion and take the tray away. I lay there for a long time, watching the blood come down into my arm.

"Jack," I said, and didn't know who I called out to, or if I had made a sound.●

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CARBON STAR

Wrapped in a shroud of grit,
buried in soot and abrasive,
a carbon star patiently dies.

Brilliant, deep red, and old;
a millionth part of its light
bleeds through the muffling cloud-shell.

If it was served by planets,
they've long since spiraled inward,
grinding their way through the cloud:

Graphite and silicon carbide
sanding down mountains and hills,
filling up valleys and seabeds—

smoothing down all the planets
to perfect ball-bearing roundness.
And after a few billion years

they spiral into a dead zone
of vacuum between star and cloud
and wait there in stable orbit,

dutiful children hovering
over the failing parent,
waiting for death to release them.

—Joe Haldeman

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Murder & Chaos

Death Qualified
By Kate Wilhelm
St. Martin's Press, $22.95

For the first hundred or so pages of Kate Wilhelm's *Death Qualified,* you're not quite sure whether you're reading an unproduced script for "Twin Peaks," or one of those well-written *New Yorker* stories about Upper-Middle Class people who live in the country in houses with decks and suffer.

On the one hand, there's this group of UMC people who live in a small town in Oregon, particularly the semi-retired lawyer whose brilliant lawyer daughter has dropped out because her idealism has been ruined by her dad, who is a Good Guy but who deals in reality.

She has been careering around the country doing odd jobs, but comes home when a call from Dad implies he's got a case he can't handle. There's a lot of father/daughter *angst* going on. And they are only two of the several well-defined personalities we're dealing with. Plus, of course, the inevitable battle with the local developer/logger.

On the other hand, there's the mutilated body of a young woman which comes tumbling down the local river, and a character's husband who, having been missing for five or six years, reappears only to have his head blown off as he comes to greet his wife. He's connected by circumstantial evidence with the mutilated body, but there's even more circumstantial evidence implicating the wife in his murder. It's because of this case that our lawyer has manipulated his daughter back to Oregon and the law. He is convinced—and we *know*—that the wife didn't do it. This is because we were told in the first chapter that the husband has been held in a drugged state for years by some high-up research types at a university and has just managed to detox himself and escape.

The subtitle of the novel is "A Mystery of Chaos." The blurb promises us "a complex mystery, a science fiction novel, and a courtroom thriller." The mystery and the thriller are there, complex and courtroomy, but the importance of the science fiction elements I'm afraid I must question.

And it's very difficult to explain why without breaking the reviewer's oath of never giving away too much of a mystery. But let's put it this way—the previously men-

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tioned academic types are onto something too hot to handle, and the victim has the key. Again, I can't say too much, but it has to do with a program on discs dealing with fractals, Mandelbrot images, and chaos theory which opens new doors of perception, and if that sounds a little too sixties, I thought so, too. On the other hand, Wilhelm makes some admirable literary comparisons between these matters and the basic courtroom life and death matters of crime and punishment, as well as giving us characters of a good deal more depth than we're used to in SF. Again, this is one of those cases where the science fictional content could well put off the mystery reader, while the SF reader is for the most part given a murder mystery. If, as in my case, the SF reader likes a good mystery, this is just fine.

(Incidentally, "death qualified" is a legal phrase which in Oregon means a lawyer fully qualified to defend a client against a charge of murder.)

Huy Brazeal & Ports West

Chase the Morning

By Michael Scott Rohan
Morrow, $19.95

There's no way around it. I hate the title. *Chase the Morning*. It sounds like one of those really dumb movie titles (on sometimes really good flicks) from the forties—*Hold Back the Dawn*, for instance, or *In This Our Life* or *Now, Voyager*. (They usually had Bette Davis or Olivia De Havilland lurking in them somewhere.) *Else the Sawdust* was somebody's idea of the ultimate such.

But what's in a name? Or a jacket cover, for that matter? With that almost irrelevant matter out of the way, I can say that Michael Scott Rohan's new novel is marvelous, and not just marvelous, but original to boot, a quality more precious than rubies these days.

A very rare form of fantasy is that which intertwines the broadly fantastic with the mundane, the fey with the here-and-now, the beyond-the-fields-we-know with those very fields themselves. (I.e., not just an artifact or creature of fantasy present in the modern world, but a world of fantasy intertwined with our own.) There have been brilliant examples in so-called "juvenile" literature. Alan Garner's *Weirdstone of Brisingamen* comes immediately to mind, as does John Masefield's *The Midnight Folk* and even more so, its sequel, *The Box of Delights*. Adult examples are harder to cite, despite valiant efforts such as John Crowley's *Little, Big*. But Rohan's done it here.

His conceit is that our "reality" is "the Core," off which spin all sorts of worlds and fantasies. One can go off the Core, out on "the Spiral," toward "the Rim," where any sort of alternate reality is possible; this is accomplished by choice, by those with knowledge, or by accident, as happens to Steve, the hero of *Chase the Morning*. Obviously this leaves the way open to go in any fantastical direction, from faerie to the fimbulwinter. Rohan chooses to throw Steve into a sort of eighteenth-century pirate fantasy, with the dark shadings of Haitian voodoo.

Steve is a rather boring yuppie

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in a British seacoast town that used to be a major port. He himself still deals in shipping, but of course it's all done by computer and fax. One night, on an impulse, he decides to go down to the old "restored" waterfront and try a gentrified meal. Instead, he finds himself among the old docks of a port filled with sailing ships.

He, almost by accident, saves a man fighting for his life against a pair of piratical types who look not quite human. Injured in the fight, Steve is taken by the man he helped, Jyp the Pilot, to a tavern whose staff, customers, and style all seem to be of two centuries ago. Steve finds his car and drives home, dismissing the whole thing as a hallucination, but the next day looks up one of the ships that had been mentioned the night before on his computer. It is there, listed as ". . . now loading for return Tortuga, Huy Brazeal, and ports West."

With that action, Steve alerts the powers of the Spiral, and is dragged into a strange and terrifying adventure, aboard a sailing ship that goes "Over the dawn! Over the airs of Earth!" through the archipelago of clouds that appear at dawn, and finds himself in a chase and a quest involving the Wolves, who are not-quite-human rovers, and the Voodoo gods of Hispaniola. Zombies, houngans, and kDamballah have never been, for me, the effective basis for fantasy or even horror stories. Here again Rohan succeeds beautifully, evoking the alien terror of voodooism, but *still* (and I must emphasize this) writing a fantasy, not a horror novel!

And finally, a small but important point—*Chase the Morning* restores the glamour of that old phrase all of us have known and forgotten: "East of the Sun, west of the Moon . . ."

Arts' Writing

Carve the Sky

By Alexander Jablokov
Morrow, $18.95

Science fiction has always been uneasy with the fine arts (literature and poetry being the exception, of course—a high percentage of SF authors are very well read). But seldom does an author tackle a theme having to do with dance, painting, or what is known as "classical music." And when s/he does, the results have often been Philistine in the extreme, usually portraying, say, a knowledge of music no more extensive than "Tchaikovsky's Greatest Hits" as ordered from TV. (I must add that there have been divers exceptions, who actually knew their Bach from their Braque).

This (and this is speculation) relates to the classic American myth that one could not be a rational scientist and an "*ir*rational" artist at the same time, or even well-versed in both those areas. And *this* leads us down the garden path to the old nineteenth-century sexist number that the arts are woman's turf, and science is only for men (despite Mme. Curie). Which is why SF was for so long unfortunately considered "for men only."

Admittedly times have changed, but it's still rare to find an SF novel that displays an awareness of the arts and of esthetics—Alexander

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Jablokov's *Carve the Sky* does so with a vengeance, and I'm not just talking Bach/Braque-type knowledge. He has created a future of the twenty-fourth century and in background and plot concentrated on its *culture*, in the broad and narrow sense.

Don't get me wrong—this is not a exercise in esthetics. It's a cracking good plot concerning an artifact, a sculpture of a dead Christ, which Vanessa Karageorge has been commissioned to authenticate as the work of a late, great sculptor, and it's introduced by murder being committed over it in Venice. The wounds of the figure contain eyes, and these eyes are made of an extraordinarily rare substance, ngomite, supposedly an artificial element created by an Elder race of the solar system, now long disappeared. The presence of these eyes indicates the existence of a quantity of ngomite larger than has ever been found before.

Needless to say, there is intrigue aplenty. Vanessa works for a shadowy organization called the Academia Sapientiae, which is almost literally the power behind the quite literal throne (sat upon by the Gensek Varlam) that rules one of the two political bodies into which the inhabited solar system is divided and across which the action ranges: the Union of States and Nationalities, which consists of Earth, the Moon, Venus, and Mars. (The other is the Technic Alliance: Io, Ganymede, Europa, Callisto, Titan, Triton, "at home around the gasbags," as Jablokov puts it.)

In best thriller/intrigue tradition, Vanessa finds herself working against or perhaps *with* one Anton Lindgren, who is Seneschal and curator (that artistic title is important) to the household of Lord Monboddo, Interrogator of Boston. Both Lindgren and his employer are agents of another organ of the Union, the division of External Security.

I look with despair at my bound galley of *Carve the Sky*, bristling with markers of matters and quotes from the book that I would like to mention here, but space forbids. There are just enough hints of the past three centuries to give a verismo feel to this future (and intriguing they are, including a worldwide Russian Orthodox Empire). And not to belabor a point, but the author has created an inhabited solar system of several societies of stimulating depth with endlessly intriguing details, mostly through concentrating on culture (such as the sculptor who flash-froze himself into his final sculpture group), and even the minor arts such as fashion, rather than technology. There is also a good deal of subtle humor (a deliciously thrown away paragraph deals with the contents of a drawer in a hotel room desk), and technological points are not exactly neglected. As an example, Earth societies cannot use heavier-than-aircraft because there are still rogue satellites which shoot down any such thing in Earth's atmosphere. And there is a neat variation on interplanetary travel which I don't recall running into before. In short, I liked this novel a lot, and not just because the author quotes Cezanne on Monet.

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Artist Writing

Expedition

By Wayne Douglas Barlowe
Workman, $18.95 (paper)

As many of you know, Wayne Douglas Barlowe is one of the foremost artists going—that word again and its ambiguity: *artist!*—okay, graphic artists going, responsible over the past years for covers that have enhanced many a novel and short story collection, and also for the imaginative art book, *Barlowe's Guide To Extraterrestrials*.

Wayne Douglas Barlowe is also the artist chosen in 2355 to accompany the expedition to the planet Darwin IV where he spent three years as wildlife artist, "to provide a more subjective and atmospheric impression of [the planet] and its lifeforms." *Expedition* is Barlowe's book about that expedition, filled with his sketches and paintings of the fauna of this newly discovered planet. There is also a good deal of textual material covering not only those lifeforms which he has so vividly depicted, but (at least in passing) providing an account of the events of the expedition, which included the tragic deaths of two of its members and the frightening possibility that the coordinates of the planet have been learned by an alien hunting cartel, raising the possibility that Darwin IV could be as denuded of its wild creatures as the Earth.

Barlowe divides the work into six sections: the grasslands and plains; the forest and periphery; the amoebic sea and littoral zone; the mountains; the tundra; and the air. He makes no bones about instances where he is unsure of behavioral aspects, but there are still dozens of creatures accurately described and pictured. It would, of course, spoil the reader's fun to go into detail as to these many tantalizing lifeforms, but an appetite can be whetted by, say, the "mummy-nest," a seemingly dead organic stump-like thing which harbors a small flying creature which Barlowe, noticing the exactness with which the flyer fits into its aperture in the trunk, speculates is its head, now detachable and more mobile than the whole large creature would have been.

Barlowe's preliminary sketches are more than adequate, and many of the finished color plates are stunning, as is an introductory map. The book is described as "the most important travel book of the twenty-fourth century," a claim that would be hard to dispute.

Ultimatum

The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction

By David Pringle
Pharos, $14.95 (paper)

I was pleased and unhappy to see, in a *IAsfm* letter column some months back, a reader back up my remarks about the difficulty of finding out about the quality and availability of books that aren't new releases. Pleased because I was pretty sure that it is a widespread problem, unhappy that it is an ongoing problem. The availability question I have no answer for—half the time these days, publishers themselves don't know what they have in print or in stock, and pity the poor bookshop buyer who tries to order one copy of one paperback. As for the quality of the

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older material, I can only help by calling your attention to every book *about* SF books I come across.

For instance, there's David Pringle's *The Ultimate Guide To Science Fiction*. Now the word ultimate makes me uncomfortable, being such an absolute absolute. But ignoring that, what this volume is is a listing of over 3,000 SF books, with author, a very brief note as to content, date, and a star rating system, à la Leonard Maltin. Now there's no arguing that this will be a very valuable tool for a lot of people (can't remember the difference between *Farmer in the Sky* and *Red Planet Mars?*, what the 'ell was *The Mote in God's Eye* about anyhow, and when was it published?). As ever, the question is just how much editorial opinion should be contained in what might be an objective reference book?

Pringle's use of a rating system (plus textual opinion) makes this book far from objective. Nonetheless, the fact that he gives Dick's *Dr. Bloodmoney* four stars and May's *The Many-Coloured Land* only two, which turns me puce with passion, does not negate a fact that I've emphasized here many times. The opinion of a critic or reviewer is still only *one person's* opinion, albeit optimistically a knowledgeable person. The intelligent reader will form his/her own opinion, more and more knowledgeably as s/he reads. In the meantime, *The Ultimate (urgh) Guide To Science Fiction* can be a help in searching out good stuff from the past.

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc. . . . A collection of Damon Knight stories with a mysterious title—*One Side Laughing* (as in "What is the sound of one side laughing?" one wonders, or am I off in the wrong direction?) —and an ambitious subtitle—"Stories Unlike Other Stories." Given Knight's long history in the field, you may find they may be just that (St. Martin's Press, $16.95).

Sequels, prequels, series and whatnot . . . Book Two of Terry Brooks' "The Heritage of Shannara" series is *The Druid of Shannara* (Ballantine, $19.95).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Little People*, edited by Jack Dann & Gardner Dozois (Ace, $3.95, paper). ●

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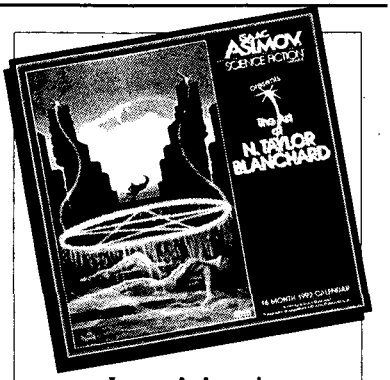

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

If you're driving to WorldCon from the West Coast, break up your trip with cons the weekend before and after. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, enclose an SASE. When calling, say why right off. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.

AUGUST 1991

23-25—**BuboniCon.** For info, write: **Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176.** Or phone: **(505) 266-8905** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Albuquerque NM (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests include: Simon Hawke, Alan Gutierrez, Arlan Andrews. Stop over between West Coast and WorldCon.

23-25—**InCon. (509) 328-1613 or 747-9180.** Shilo Inn, Spokane WA. Terry Books, Phil Foglio.

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V.** Hyatt Regency, Chicago IL. WorldCon. Clement, Powers. $150 at the door.

30-Sep. 1—**French National Con.** Centre Culturel, Montfort-sur-Argens, France. FFr 240.00.

SEPTEMBER 1991

6-8—**German Nat'l. Con, Verkehrsamt Berlin/Europa Ctr., Berlin 30 D-1000 Germany. (030) 781-9624.**

6-8—**CopperCon, Box 11743, Phoenix AZ 85061.** Theme: Horror of SF. Stop over coming from WorldCon.

8-14—**VolgaCon, % B. A. Zavgordny, Poste Restante, Volgograd 400066, USSR. (34) 74-62 or 44-09.**

20-22—**MosCon, Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843. (208) 882-0364.** Relax-a-con at Cavanaugh's Motor Inn.

20-22—**OutsideCon, BAND H.Q., Box 8335, St. Bethlehem TN 37155.** Campout in a park nr. Dixon TN.

27-29—**ConTradiction, Box 2043, Newmarket Stn., Niagara Falls NY 14301.** G. Effinger, M. Lackey.

27-30—**AlbaCon, % Heenan, 1155 Pollockshaws Rd. #2/L, Glasgow G41 3NG, Scotland.** Central Hotel.

OCTOBER 1991

4-6—**WeaponsCon, % Box 75, Duquesne PA 15110. (412) 466-3803.** Pittsburgh PA. SF/fantasy weapons.

4-6—**EroticCon, 17 Guildford St., Brighton BN1 3LA, UK.** Donnington Manor Hotel, Sevenoaks Kent UK.

4-6—**RoVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400.** Hal Clement, Richard Pini. Media oriented.

4-6—**ConText, Box 2954, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 889-0436.** Niven, J. Tarr. Written SF (no media).

4-6—**Irish Nat'l. Con, 23 Rushbrook Ct., Templeogue Dublin 6W, Eire.** Royal Marine, Dun Laoghaire.

4-6—**MinnCon, 3136 Park Ave. S., Minneapolis MN 55407. (612) 825-8256.** Dark fantasy and horror.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3-7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The World SF Con. $85 to 9/30/91.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, Box 22097, San Francisco CA 94122. (916) 349-1670.** WorldCon. $70 to 9/30/91.

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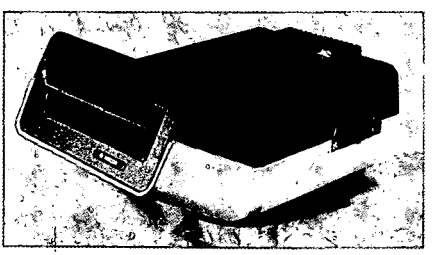

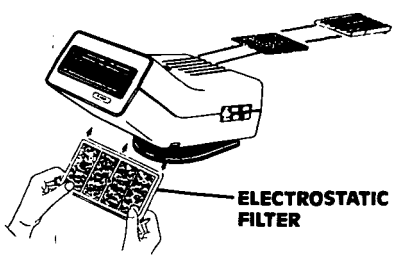

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